THE MYSTERY FLIGHT

JOHN CREASEY

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AUTHOR OF

THE MIRACLE 'PLANE
THE S.O.S. FLIGHT
THE AIR MARAUDERS
THE MYSTERY 'PLANE
BLAZING THE AIR TRAIL
THE TREASURE FLIGHT
JUNGLE FLIGHT MYSTERY

AS SOON AS HE HAD RECOVERED HIS WIND, HE EDGED ALONG INCH BY INCH TOWARDS THE ENGINE

p. 124

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BY

JOHN CREASEY

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CHAPTER I

THE END OF A QUARREL

PETER MASON and Jim Spenser, the one tall for his age, very lean and dark-haired, the other shorter, broad-shouldered and with fair, curly hair which at school had earned him the unwanted nickname of "Girlie," walked steadily along the narrow country lane. On either side they could see sweeping downland, and here and there small copses of trees—many of them firs and pines that stretched very high towards the sky—dark against the lighter green on the grass. The lane was very high up for that part of Hampshire, and it led along the top of a series of hills, with the result that it was like a switchback, up and down all the time.

Both lads—Peter was just over seventeen, and Jim would reach his seventeenth year in another few days—were footsore and weary. For the last ten minutes neither of them had spoken a word, and for a good reason. Their last effort at conversation had nearly ended in a free fight.

Peter Mason, who had always been quick tempered, was of a very different type from Jim

Spenser, whose cheery-looking countenance really told the truth so far as his temper was concerned. For few things riled him—but there was one fault which his friend had to a very marked degree, which annoyed him more than he could say.

If Peter had a grouse of any kind, he would keep moaning about it, and irritated his friend so much that Jim's temper would flare up. Frequently in the past they had literally leaped at each other. Apart from these clashes, which were entirely of temperament, they were fast friends. They had been through Greyvale School together, joining in the same year and in the same Form, and now they were both on holiday after the summer term, and were looking forward to returning to Greyvale in a few weeks' time, for their last term at the School.

There was one big difference in their circumstances.

Peter Mason's father was a wealthy man with a large business in London, and the older man had planned for his son to go from Greyvale to Cambridge. Jim Spenser, on the other hand, had no parents, and what little money had been left him at their death had been needed for his education.

His prospects were definitely poor.

There would be no university for him, and he would have to find some kind of occupation, probably in a London office. The head-master,

who had been a very good friend, had influence with a certain company, and had promised Jim that the job would be forthcoming.

Jim Spenser, true to his nature, had tried his best to feel grateful. He had failed. For there was only one big driving force in his life—and that was a love of aeroplanes. He had studied the subject of aeronautics ardently and in his study at Greyvale a dozen or more books on aviation graced the bookshelf. Luckily Peter Mason was also interested in flying, and although both lads took a great interest in sports of all kinds, the thought of flying and working in connection with aeroplanes was always at the forefront of their minds.

Jim Spenser, then, was looking forward without much pleasure to the time when he would enter a company's office, and busy himself with dull figures and accounts. If only he could have got the prospect of some kind of job, even a humble one, in some aeroplane sheds or at an airport, he would have been thoroughly happy.

But the chances of his achieving that ambition were very small.

Their walk that day, and the quarrel which had resulted, had arisen from their mutual love of aeroplanes.

Peter Mason's father had a week-end cottage in Hampshire, which was looked after by a middle-aged, cheery housekeeper. Mr. Mason had realised that Jim's holidays were not likely

to be much fun on his own, so he had suggested that the two lads should go down to Hampshire and spend their time together.

The prospect had been glorious and they had been there now for ten days. A great deal of the time had been spent in walking across the Downs, fishing in a stream that ran near the cottage, and an occasional visit to Winchester or Southampton to go to the pictures, or to look over one of the great ships which were docked in Southampton harbour.

They had spent one day as near Calshot as they could, for there they knew was the great base for Air Force 'planes, and they had watched the tremendous biplanes fitted with floats, rising from the surface of the water as easily as from the ground, and alighting on it with the same uncanny accuracy.

On that day they had determined to do everything possible to spend a few days somewhere near an aerodrome. Calshot itself was too far from the cottage for them to go every day.

Jim Spenser had noticed that several aeroplanes, usually of the same kind, flew over the cottage about the same time each day. Neither lad knew the district well, but on visiting Enbury village—about a mile away from the cottage—they had learned that a small commercial airport was situated some ten miles further south.

Unfortunately there was no way of getting to this airport by road. On the night before they

had started to tramp along this narrow lane over the hills they had planned to cycle to the airport, but early that morning Jim had discovered to his disgust that a ride along the gravel-top roads on the previous day had punctured both his back and front tyres.

The tyres of both lads' cycles had suffered a great deal in the past week or two and there was no repairing material left. Rather than walk into Enbury to get the bikes repaired they had decided to walk the ten miles to the airport, which distance was well within their strength.

Peter had started to grumble and grouse soon after they had left the cottage. It was a warm day, and walking wasn't too comfortable. Jim had put up with his friend's complaints as long as he could, but finally he had snapped back with the result that they had quarrelled.

But that wasn't the worst.

They had taken their directions from an old man in the village, but they eventually reached a fork, about which they had no directions.

"I vote we take the right fork," Peter Mason had said.

"I'm inclined to think it's the left," Jim had announced.

"That's right, start arguing again!"

Jim had grated his teeth, but realised that it was useless to argue with his friend at the moment.

"I tell you what," he said. "I'll toss whether

we go left or right. Heads we go my way, tails we go right."

"All right," Peter had said rather grudgingly.

The coin had come down heads and they had taken the left-hand fork. They had walked at least eleven miles, and for the last two Peter had been complaining that he was sure they should have turned right instead of left. It was that which had led to the last exchange of "compliments," and now both of them were walking wearily—and yet refusing to admit their fatigue to each other—along the flint-strewn road.

If only they had been walking along the main road they would have passed a cottage or a tea-shop by now where they could have rested for ten minutes and had a drink of cool lemonade. But this place seemed absolutely forlorn and forgotten. For the whole of the past four miles they had not seen a cottage or a building of any sort. Here and there sheep grazing in fields had proved there was a farm of some kind near, but rather than turn right or left they had kept to the lane.

Suddenly Peter Mason could keep silent no longer.

"Jim old scout," he said, "I'm sorry I lost my temper. I know you wouldn't have gone wrong if you could have helped it."

Jim Spenser chuckled, relieved that the quarrel was patched up. Their differences rarely lasted long.

"We'll call it quits," he said. "But I don't fancy our chances of reaching the airport to-day."

"Never mind," said Peter. "By to-morrow we'll have our bikes repaired and then there won't be anything to worry about."

"I——" began Jim Spenser.

He broke off unexpectedly. As he spoke he was looking ahead of him, and it seemed that the hill up which they were struggling now ceased abruptly and dropped to the end of the world.

Immediately ahead of them there was a vast expanse of blue sky.

"What's the trouble?" asked Peter.

"I've got an idea I can see a couple of 'planes," said Jim.

"Can you, by Jove! Perhaps we aren't far out after all."

Jim didn't answer for a few seconds. The sight of the aeroplanes—there was no doubt now but that Jim had been right—had cheered them both up considerably, and they even forgot their weariness.

Two aeroplanes were approaching very quickly and it seemed that they would fly immediately above the heads of the two youngsters. It was obvious now, that both machines were biplanes, and Peter was of the opinion that they were the same 'planes which they had seen passing over the cottage.

Soon the distant roar of the biplanes' engines

came to their ears. Now the two great birds of the air seemed monstrous, and a picture which it would be hard to forget. The sun was shining on their all-metal sides, making them look like burnished gold. It was possible for the two walkers, who were eyeing the biplanes intently, to see the actual marking of the registration letters on the sides and beneath the wings of the aeroplanes, and they could even see the glass windows—tiny though they were from this distance—in the sides of the cabins.

Anything to do with aeroplanes or the air invariably cheered them. Not for the first time a quarrel was completely forgotten, and they were entirely at one because of the fascination which they felt.

Peter, whose ears were rather keener than his friend's, frowned a little.

"I've got an idea, Jim, that there's something wrong up there."

"Something wrong? How do you mean?"

"Well, I'm hanged if I think both the engines are turning over properly. Can you hear anything?"

Jim Spenser strained his ears, but he noticed nothing. As a matter of fact one of the biplanes was flying without trouble and the regular roar of its engine drowned the spluttering of the other. But Peter Mason was right.

One of the two aeroplanes was in trouble—and serious trouble! Its pilot, a strong-faced,

cleared-eyed man, had struggled for the last half an hour to keep his engine going, but he was afraid that it must fail. Only a few more miles flying was necessary to reach the airport safely, but he was by no means sure it was wise to try and get there.

And then suddenly his engine stopped.

Down below the two lads realised it. The roaring was definitely less now; and then they saw one of the most amazing things they had ever observed in their lives.

They did not know that flying at the height of five thousand feet, as these two machines were doing, a strong, gusty wind was blowing. Nor did they know that an extra severe gust of wind caused the trouble. But they did see the whole of that amazing occurrence.

One of the biplanes seemed to stop dead still while in mid air, and then, with a frightening turn, its nose dipped downwards!

It was true that they had seen similar things happen when a pilot was stunting, but the silence of the engine and the strange way in which the 'plane had stopped flying evenly, was more than frightening.

The 'plane would crash; in their minds both lads realised it, and as though inspired by a single thought, they climbed over the hedge of the lane and raced towards the spot where the crash would come.

CHAPTER II

MARK GRESHAM

THAT feeling which had filled both lads was obviously a true one. The biplane, falling very fast and in a terrifying tail-spin, would hit the ground almost any moment. It did not seem possible that the occupant could escape death. Jim Spenser and Peter Mason had their hearts in their mouths as they hurried over the rough, uneven ground. They knew they could not reach the field in which the 'plane would crash before that dreadful thing happened. But it was just possible that they could reach it in time to offer some help to the injured pilot and any passengers he might carry.

As far as they could judge the machine would land in a field about a quarter of a mile away. Their earlier weariness was completely forgotten, and the only thing in their minds was to get to the spot quickly.

As a result of this grim determination they looked at nothing but the falling 'plane. It seemed that their very hearts would stop. Lower and lower hurtled that leviathan of the air; then suddenly the 'plane disappeared behind the tops of a group of trees.

And then came the crash!

A tremendous report which seemed to shake the very earth on which they were standing filled the air. A voluminous cloud of black dust mingled with smoke, pieces of metal and debris was flying through the air, and before they realised it other pieces were actually hurtling past their faces.

The smoke and dust was like a great black cloud over the field where the crash had come. It had seemed impossible that anyone could escape alive from such a catastrophe. Both Peter Mason and Jim Spenser were dreadfully pale, but neither of them dreamed of hesitating in their desperate rescue attempt.

It flashed through Jim's mind suddenly to glance up and see what the other aeroplane was doing. He saw that it was hovering round in a wide circle, and he noticed that the pilot was intent on finding a landing place so that he could come to the rescue.

And then he saw something else.

Not three hundred yards away from them towards the right, something was dropping through the air—something that looked like a great white balloon, and at the end of it a small black object was dangling.

For a minute he could hardly believe his eyes. But suddenly a realisation of what had happened flashed through his mind.

"Peter, look!" He almost screamed in his excitement. "A *parachute!*"

"A parachute!" Peter echoed, unbelievingly. He swung round and looked in the direction of his friend's gaze. As he did so he realised that Jim had been right.

The pilot—or one of the passengers—of the falling biplane had jumped for his life, and it seemed that his last moment's effort would succeed. The parachute, with that dangling figure, now actually recognisable as a man, was less than three hundred feet from the ground and falling rapidly. The two lads turned away from the wreckage and hurried in the direction of the parachute, which was very much nearer.

Once the balloon was caught in an unexpected gust of wind and sent upwards for a few feet, and then it dropped down very quickly, and with a dull thud the airman hit the ground. Both Peter Mason and Jim Spenser saw how cleverly he manœuvred.

As his feet touched the ground he bent his knees quickly to break the force of the fall. Then, unable to prevent it, he dropped to the ground. The parachute, already beginning to crumple, had yet enough force to drag him a few yards in the direction of the lads and then it collapsed entirely and its folds fluttered in the light wind and pulled against the earth.

"I wonder if he's hurt," gasped Peter.

"Not much—I expect," puffed Jim Spenser.

Despite his words Jim was by no means sure

he was right. For the man was lying very still on the ground. They were only a few dozen yards away from him now, and they saw that he was dressed in flying kit, and they could see beneath the helmet which he was wearing his square jaw and his rugged-looking face. It was Peter who saw the ugly gash across his forehead.

"He's been knocked out," he cried. "It would be dreadful if he was badly hurt after that wonderful jump!"

"Perhaps it's nothing serious," said Jim Spenser. "I wish to goodness we had some water."

The same wish was echoed in Peter's mind. Now they had reached the still, unconscious figure, and they saw that the pilot of the crashed 'plane was a man of medium height, broad-shouldered and stocky, and capable looking.

"The trouble is," muttered Jim, "that we want to know whether there's anyone else in the 'plane."

"Perhaps we'd better get over there right away," suggested Peter. "But wait a minute."

As he spoke he glanced upwards. His keen ears had detected a slight lessening in the thunderous roaring of the other biplane which had been flying above them. Now he saw that it had ceased flying in circles and was heading northwards.

"He must have seen us," Peter said quickly,

"and realised that someone was with this fellow. Had there been anyone in the smashed 'plane he would have landed."

"That seems reasonable," said Jim.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the eyes of the injured pilot flickered open. Both lads stared down at him anxiously. For a moment he looked dazed, and then comprehension floated through his mind.

It was Jim who spoke first.

"Were you alone in the 'plane?" he asked.

A slight smile seemed to touch the corners of the airman's lips.

"Yes," he murmured in a low voice. "Everyone's all right if I am!"

The liking which both lads had taken to the man when they had first set eyes on him was strengthened. Anyone whose first words, after recovering consciousness and after making that terrifying parachute leap, could be humorous, was after their own hearts.

"I'm afraid we're stuck out in the wilds," said Jim. "Shall we cut off and try to find a cottage or somewhere to get some water?"

The airman shook his head slightly.

"I'll be able to toddle in a few minutes. You might loosen my collar for me."

It was Peter who acted on the suggestion, and it was obvious that the man felt better when his collar was undone. They both stood looking down, somewhat self-conscious, but they still

could not rid themselves of the feeling that they liked this fellow.

After five minutes by Jim Spenser's watch, the airman struggled into a sitting position, and then with the lads' eager help, reached his feet.

"Thanks a lot," he said, his voice much stronger now. "I saw a cottage a few hundred yards behind those trees where the 'plane crashed. Let's get going, shall we?"

The trio started across the fields, and both Peter Mason and Jim Spenser felt winded. They had come out with a grim determination to get to the airport, but they had never dreamed that they would get in conversation with an actual pilot, and see anything as thrilling as they had done.

But for the time being they wanted to get to the cottage which the pilot had seen, so that his wound could be bathed. For that matter, they could do with some refreshment themselves. And they did not concern themselves with what was going to happen after that.

CHAPTER III

A SURPRISE

THE two lads and the airman were met by a little, apple-cheeked woman as they neared the cottage. Some distance away from her, hurrying over the rough ground as fast as he could, was an old man whose face was full of anxiety. The woman also looked anxious, but when she saw the pilot in his flying kit an expression of relief crossed her kindly features.

"Were you in that, sir?"

"Yes," said the pilot, smiling cheerfully. "No one's hurt, I'm glad to say."

"The Lord be thanked for that!" exclaimed the old lady, and she raised her voice, calling to the man who was still hurrying towards the cottage. "Jarge—Jarge—there be no one hurt!"

"Obviously," said the pilot, "you saw the spill."

"That we did," said the old lady. "Jarge was going to take a short cut to see if he could help summat. Are ye sure ye're not hurt a bit, mister?"

"One or two little bumps and bruises, that's all," said the airman cheerfully, "but I could

do with a drop of tea! Do you think you could manage it?"

"I've a kettle biling right now," said the old woman, and leaving the two lads and the flier in the charge of "Jarge," she bustled into the cottage.

The old countryman was just as pleased as his wife that no one had been hurt. He amused the lads by shaking his head and saying that no good could ever come of trying to fly through the air. He seemed convinced that it would never be possible to conquer the air, and although he admitted the marvellous achievements that had been accomplished, he was still pessimistic.

The pilot, both lads were glad to find, did not take offence at the old man's words, but smilingly pointed out some of the miraculous flying records which had been made in the past few years. Talking quite amicably between themselves, the little party reached the door of the cottage. The old man showed them into the tiny front parlour, and ushered them into easy chairs; and then he hurried out to help his wife. The airman chuckled as the door closed behind him.

"He's a nice old fellow," he said, and Peter Mason saw that there was a twinkle in his eyes. "I expect you agree with him about flying?"

"We certainly don't!" Peter and Jim spoke simultaneously.

The airman chuckled again.

"I had an idea you didn't, but before we get on to that it's time I introduced myself."

A couple of minutes later the two lads knew that the pilot's name was Mark Gresham, and that he was one of the senior pilots of the Hockley Air Service, one of whose flying fields was a couple of miles from the spot where the 'plane had crashed.

They learned also that Mark Gresham had been a long distance flier before he had given up making records, and taken to commercial flying. It was not long before their enthusiasm for the air and everything in it made itself obvious, and the pilot discovered that they had actually walked nearly ten miles that day in order to try and get to the air-field so that they could have a look round.

He smiled at their enthusiasm, but he could not help liking both youngsters. He would probably have found them just as likeable even had they not been prepared to risk everything to assist the man they had expected to find in the crashed aeroplane.

Before they could get any further in their conversation the old lady and the countryman tapped on the door and entered. Mark Gresham glanced across and then gasped in surprise.

"Great Scot!" he exclaimed, "you don't mean us to starve!"

"Jumping snakes!" exclaimed Jim Spenser,

"if that doesn't look the finest sight on earth!"

The country couple had been so relieved to find that no one had been hurt in the smash, and they had taken so much to the two youngsters, that they had decided to surpass themselves. Home-made cakes, buns, strawberries and cream—although it was rather late in the year for strawberries—thin farmhouse bread-and-butter spread thickly, a dozen and one things which would have made any schoolboy's eyes glisten. In addition there was a great pot of tea, and the old lady had made some lemonade in case the youngsters preferred it.

Having brought the spread in the old folk would have gone again, for truth to tell they were a little over-awed by the gentry who had visited their humble home. But Mark Gresham would not hear of it, and he insisted that the old couple should join them. The next half hour passed quickly, everyone was in high spirits, and Jim perhaps happier than anyone.

But all good things had to come to an end, and soon Mark Gresham stood up.

"If I could have a wash," he said to the apple-cheeked woman—whose name they learned was Mrs. Crabtree—"I would be awfully grateful."

"Ye shall all have a wash. Jarge has put the water up in the bedroom, sir. He'll be showing you the way."

Half an hour later, refreshed by their wash,

and the welcome meal, the two lads and the airman left the cottage. The youngsters saw that Mark insisted on the old woman taking a very handsome present, and they knew that for the rest of their lives that day would be warm in the hearts of Mr. and Mrs. Crabtree.

They had learned that the nearest village was a little more than a mile away, across country, and they trudged cheerfully towards it. The sun was a little lower in the heavens, and now and again they were able to walk along the side of a hedge, which gave them a little shelter.

They reached the village after about twenty minutes' going, and to their immense relief the first thing they saw was a bus waiting in the Market Square.

"That takes me to the aerodrome," said Mark Gresham. "Where are you two going?"

"I think we'd better get home just as quickly as we can," said Peter. "We've been out a long time as it is."

"Just as you like," said the airman, "but I thought perhaps you'd care to come and look through some of the sheds." His face was so serious as he spoke that the hearts of the two lads dropped. Truth to tell they had been hoping hard that he would make that suggestion, although nothing would have persuaded them to ask him. Now it seemed that the chance of going through the aerodrome, the one thing in the world that they wanted more than any-

thing, was in their grasp, and yet they would be unable to take it.

"Well," said Jim Spenser slowly, "I suppose we really *ought* to go home."

"I don't know whether anyone's expecting us early," piped up Peter.

"You mustn't take any chances of annoying your parents," said Mark Gresham, very solemnly.

"Oh, it's not our parents," said Peter Mason, and in a few words he explained just what they were doing at the Hampshire cottage.

Mark Gresham nodded, and when Peter had finished he said with a chuckle:

"If you'd care to come, hop on this bus with me."

There was no doubt about whether they wanted to go or not. Their eyes gleamed, their faces beamed. Mark Gresham told himself that they were a couple of pleasant youngsters, and he wondered what he could do, in addition to showing them the aerodrome, to reward them for their efforts that afternoon.

During the short journey by the local bus which rattled and banged along the uneven roadway, stopping every hundred yards or so to pick up a countryman or woman, he let the youngsters talk.

Mark Gresham was a good-hearted man, and he was rarely surprised, but he admitted to himself that he was surprised at the depth of the youngsters' knowledge of aeronautics and air-

craft. It was quite obvious that they had made it their hobby for a long time past, and he learned also that both of them spent a great deal of time building model aeroplanes which were exact replicas of modern giants of the air, although, of course, on a tiny scale.

Not only did they know a great deal about flying and aeronautics, but they also rattled off the names of the most famous flying aces in the past ten or fifteen years. Names which were familiar enough to Mark Gresham as a flier, but which were little known outside the circle of the air, tripped off their tongues without hesitation. And it was increasingly obvious that their enthusiasm was sincere.

It was not long before they were off the bus, and they had a couple of hundred yards to walk before they reached the aerodrome. As they neared it two or three aerodrome officials, including a pilot, saw Mark Gresham and hailed him. With a word to the youngsters asking them to hang back for a few minutes, Mark hurried forward. But the youngsters could not help hearing the words which greeted him. They were spoken by a tall, lean-faced man who looked as though he was in a raging temper.

"I'm glad you're all right, Gresham. You're a lucky man, all the same; your engine was deliberately tampered with, and if the devil who did the job had had his way, you would have crashed over the sea without a chance of escape!"

CHAPTER IV

AN UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENT

WHETHER or not Mark Gresham pointed out to the man who was speaking that the youngsters were well within earshot, neither Peter Mason or Jim Spenser knew. They would not have been human had their curiosity not flared up when they heard those grimly-spoken words, and they were so surprised that they could hardly think straight. At all events they heard nothing more, for the lean-faced man lowered his voice. Perhaps for five minutes the little group stood there talking. Peter and Jim would have given a great deal to have heard what they said, but obviously it was impossible to get any nearer. Eventually Mark Gresham broke away from the other three men and came back to them. He was smiling cheerfully, and had they not overheard those words neither youngster would have had the slightest idea that anything was amiss.

"Well, my sons," he said in his hearty voice, "everything's fine. We can go in right away and have a look round."

The next half an hour was a delight to the youngsters. They even forgot they had heard

it said that the aeroplane had been deliberately damaged by someone who had wanted Mark Gresham to die. There were a dozen hangars at the aerodrome, and they climbed in and out of gigantic air-liners, small passenger 'planes and even little machines—such as the *Hawk Moth* and the *Blue Bird*—which were used for private flights, or else for teaching beginners to handle a machine in the air.

"I suppose," said Mark Gresham, as they climbed out of a *Blue Bird*, "you two will be wanting to go up one of these fine days?"

"If we could get up to-morrow," said Jim Spenser enthusiastically, "we wouldn't hesitate!"

Mark Gresham smiled.

"Well," he said, "if you behave yourselves I'll see what I can do. As it happens I'm not working the day after to-morrow, and if you'll give me instructions how to reach the cottage where you're staying, I'll come for you, take you up, bring you here and then see whether you're a victim of air-sickness or not!"

"You really mean it?" Peter put the question, although he could hardly form the words.

"If you care to come, of course," said Mark Gresham.

"*Care* to come!" exclaimed Jim Spenser. "We've both longed for a flight more than anything else in the world! But are you sure no one will mind?"

"I'm absolutely sure," remarked Gresham,

"and I'll be along some time on Thursday morning. Is that all right with you?"

"It's glorious," said Jim Spenser. "We can't thank you enough, Mr. Gresham."

"Wait until you see whether you enjoy it or not," said Mark, "before you jump to anything like that. But how are you going to get back to-night?"

Both lads had completely forgotten that they were some ten miles from the cottage where they were staying, and now they suddenly realised that they had to walk that distance. They were tired enough as it was, and neither of them could look forward with any pleasure to walking for another two or three hours. More than that, they realised that probably they would not reach the cottage until after dark—and the housekeeper who looked after the cottage for Peter Mason's father would be worried out of her life.

They did not propose, however, to let Mark Gresham realise how awkward the situation was for them. He was being so good that they decided it was not fair to worry him about anything else.

"Oh, we'll walk," said Jim sturdily. "It won't hurt us, will it, Peter?"

"We've got plenty to talk about on the way," said Peter quickly.

Mark Gresham chuckled, and with a sudden movement he took both of them firmly by the

back of their necks, and bumped their heads gently together.

"You're a couple of nincompoops! Do you think I'm going to let you walk back to-night? I've got some important business to attend to here, but a friend of mine is just going off duty, and as he lives at Winchester it won't be difficult for him to drop you!"

"Are you sure it's no trouble?" asked Jim Spenser.

"No trouble at all," said Mark Gresham. "Not that it'd matter a great deal if it was. Come over to the offices, and have a bite to eat before you go."

They found that the offices of the Hockley Aerodrome Company included a small restaurant and café, sleeping quarters, a gymnasium, shower and swimming baths and a dozen other things. The Company realised that its clients appreciated comfort as well as sport and pleasure facilities while they were waiting for their 'planes. The two youngsters had a quick look round the building, then Mark Gresham took them into the restaurant and regaled them with sandwiches and gingerbeer. They were surprised to find how hungry they were, although it was more easily understandable when they realised nearly four hours had passed since they had left Mr. and Mrs. Crabtree.

It was now nearly half past five, and Mark Gresham glanced from time to time towards the door.

"Bob should be here soon," he said.

"Who's Bob?" asked Peter Mason.

"Bob Denver," said Mark Gresham, "is a cousin of mine and also one of the senior pilots here. You'll like him—or I'll miss my bet."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the restaurant door opened and a tall, very lean man entered. Both lads could not help comparing him with Mark Gresham. Mark was only middle height, very broad, very thick-set, and with rugged but pleasant features. The newcomer must have been at least six foot three inches tall, incredibly thin, and although his shoulders were broad enough, his clothes seemed to hang about him as though there had been a time when he had weighed two or three stones heavier. He was wearing a flying cap, but one lock of startlingly red hair was misplaced, and hung down over his right ear. He had a tremendous hooked nose and a wide, smiling mouth, and one glance into his cheery blue eyes would have made most people realise what a pleasant fellow he was.

He waved to Mark Gresham and reached the table in some half a dozen long steps.

"What ho, what ho! What's this, Mark, a beanfeast?"

"Meet two young friends of mine," said Mark Gresham. "Jim Spenser—and Peter Mason."

"Friends of Mark's," said Bob Denver with a bow, "are friends of mine. How are you?"

"If you'd stop fooling for a moment," said Mark Gresham, "I'd tell you what you've got to do."

"I like that!" said Bob Denver, "what I've *got* to do. I'd have you know, my fine friend, that I'm the master of my fate, and you can whistle before I do anything you tell me to."

Mark Gresham chuckled, and it was obvious that he was used to the verbosity of his friend.

"As you won't be serious I'll tell you I've promised these youngsters that you'll run them home. They helped me out of a spot, and the least you can do is to show your gratitude."

"My gratitude for helping you out of your spot?" demanded Bob Denver, but as he spoke he winked at the two youngsters. "What happened, Mark?"

Mark Gresham explained how his engine had stalled in the air, how the biplane had crashed, and that only by making the parachute jump he had been able to reach land alive. He emphasised the youngsters' part in the affair rather more than either Jim or Peter felt was deserved, but at the end of it he had the satisfaction of seeing that his cousin was no longer fooling.

"I'll take you back with pleasure," he said to the two lads. "I——"

He broke off, for in the middle of his words the doors of the restaurant opened and a short, thick-set man appeared. Bob Denver saw him

out of the corner of his eyes, and Mark Gresham caught sight of him at the same time.

Both lads were hardly able to believe their eyes.

For in a twinkling of an eye Mark Gresham rooted at his pocket and whipped out a gun!

The yellow rays of the afternoon sun shining through the windows of the restaurant glinted on the grey steel!

At the same time Bob Denver leapt from his seat and grabbed the back of the chair on which he had been sitting.

"Get behind the table, young 'uns!" he snapped.

Jim and Peter were so startled that they hardly knew how to move, but they dropped beneath the table, and as they did so they heard a hiss, caught a glimpse of a stab of flame which flashed from a gun that the man in the doorway held, and then heard a bullet peck into the wall behind them! It seemed absolutely fantastic that this was happening; more fantastic that Mark Gresham and Bob Denver obviously knew the gunman, but it was true!

The first bullet which the man had fired was followed by a second and third in quick succession, but while those bullets were honing across the room Mark Gresham touched the trigger of his own gun. Twice flames stabbed out, twice the youngsters heard the hiss of the bullet—both guns were obviously fitted with

silencers, which muffled the noise of the shots —and they heard the man at the door exclaim aloud.

The whole thing happened so quickly that they were hardly able to realise what it was. From their hiding place they could just see the legs of the man by the door, and suddenly they saw the fellow drop to the floor. As he did so Bob Denver took a step towards him, but Mark Gresham snapped:

"Steady, Bob, there may be more of them!"

Bob Denver stopped in the middle of a stride and a moment later crouched behind the table with the two youngsters next to him. For a few seconds silence reigned; and all the time Jim Spenser and Peter Mason were wondering what nightmare this was, and wondering also whether it could be possible that there were more men near the office building, ready to shoot.

If there were—what would happen?

CHAPTER V

CHASE BY AIR

THE two lads continued to crouch behind the table, their minds in a ferment. They could tell that both the men were prepared for further trouble, and because of the excitement they almost forgot the fantastic suddenness with which this thing had happened. A few hours—in fact a few minutes—ago they would have considered it impossible that such a thing as this could have happened. But it was not imagination; the bullets had actually been fired, a man had actually been wounded, and now they were crouching behind the scanty cover of the table, afraid that more bullets would come.

What strange mystery had they bumped into?

Both lads thought immediately of the words of the tall, lean-faced man who had greeted Mark Gresham when they had entered the air-field. Obviously there was some connection between this attack and the fact that the engine of the biplane had been tampered with. Whether they would ever learn more of it was by no means certain, but both of them were more excited than afraid, and they would have taken very little persuading to jump into action.

Perhaps two minutes went by; the seconds dragged and seemed everlasting, but finally Mark Gresham said in a low tone:

"I think we'll chance it, Bob. You two fellows"—he spoke now to Peter and Jim—"had better stay where you are."

Both lads were on tiptoe to take some part in this affair, but they were wise enough to accept the other's suggestion as an order. Still crouching with their heads just a few inches above the top of the table so that they could see what was happening, they waited. The long, raking form of Bob Denver and the sturdy figure of Mark Gresham hurried across the restaurant, which had been empty but for the two lads and the two men. Mark reached the fallen gunman first and bent over him.

Bob Denver followed suit, and Bob took the gun from the injured man's hand.

"Better carry him to a couch," said Mark. "He's wounded badly through the shoulder and through the leg. I——"

And then very slowly the door opened.

Neither Mark Gresham nor Bob Denver noticed it, for they were too busy looking after the injured man. But the two lads, watching everything wide-eyed, saw that slow, somehow sinister movement, and then in front of their startled eyes saw the muzzle of a gun poking through.

It was all Peter Mason could do to stop himself from bellowing a warning, but Jim Spenser

—always the cooler of the two—grabbed his arm.

"Quiet!" he whispered. "A shout won't do anything, but if we can throw a cup at the door we might save them."

Peter was quick to appreciate the wisdom of this suggestion. Slowly, silently and all the time in agony lest the man with the gun should shoot, they took a cup apiece from the table and poised it. A thought flashed through Jim Spenser's mind that cricket had assured their aim being reasonably true.

Still without a sound Jim hurled the cup!

Fast upon it Peter's missile hurtled across the room. One after the other they crashed against the opening door, dead on the mark. The gun disappeared, but obviously the man who was holding it was so startled by this unexpected development that his finger touched the delicate hair-trigger, and a bullet stabbed into the ground only a few feet from Bob Denver's legs.

The effort had succeeded!

The two lads no longer remembered Mark Gresham's orders, but scooped up saucers, sugar-basins and everything that they could lay their hands on was rushed across the room. They reached the door before Mark could move and flung it open. About ten yards away, running fast, was the second man, who looked very similar to the fellow who was wounded. The lads saw in a flash why he had taken to his heels. The

gun had dropped from his hand, after that single shot, and it was lying only a couple of feet away from Jim Spenser.

Jim did not hesitate; he bent down, grabbed the gun, stuffing it into his pocket. Then both lads gave chase, hurling their missiles as they went. Once a sugar-basin cracked into the man's back and broke into a hundred pieces, and once a saucer smashed across his head. But there was not enough weight in either of them to stop the fellow, who was running like a hare and gaining fast.

By this time Mark Gresham and Bob Denver were outside the restaurant, and Mark's gun spoke. But he was rather too far away from the fleeing man to make a hit. Jim, conscious of an odd feeling in the pit of his stomach, drew the automatic from his pocket, levelled it and touched the trigger. Three bullets spat out in quick succession. One after the other, foot-long stabs of flame left the muzzle of the gun, and Jim felt a slight vibration up his arm to his shoulder. He realised quickly that all the time he kept his finger on the trigger bullets would go out, and he eased off.

Peter Mason let out a cry of grim satisfaction.

"Got him! Good man, Jim!"

It was true. One of the bullets which Jim had fired—the first which he had ever fired in his life—had taken the running man through the calf. The fellow staggered, almost falling, and

then went on, but he was obviously in pain and made very little speed. By this time Mark Gresham and Bob Denver had caught up with the youngsters, and as Mark flashed by he snapped similar words to those Peter had done.

"Well done, youngster, but be careful!"

It was now obvious that their quarry was racing towards an aeroplane which was standing about five hundred yards away. The two youngsters, blowing hard and very nearly spent —one way and another they had had an exciting day—were afraid for a few seconds that he would reach it. But they were reckoning without Bob Denver's amazing turn of speed. Both Denver and Gresham had been slow in starting. The smash of the crockery and the single bullet-shot had taken them completely by surprise, and for a few seconds they had been unable to move. But now they were running with amazing speed, and Bob Denver seemed to fly over the ground. Jim Spenser and Peter Mason saw that they were rapidly gaining on the man. Soon he was within a couple of yards of the fellow and it seemed quite certain that he would catch him; but the lads had reckoned without the man in the aeroplane.

They could hear the engines of the machine —a twin-engined monoplane—roaring, and saw the monster of the skies trembling. Bob Denver's hand was stretched out, grabbing the other fellow's shoulder, when the cabin door opened

and a swarthy, bearded man stood for a moment in the opening. The lads did not see the gun in his hand until he touched the trigger and the flames spat out.

Both of them heard Bob Denver utter a sharp cry, and saw him go bowling over, obviously hit in the leg. Almost at the same moment Mark Gresham—a couple of yards to the right of his cousin—dropped down full length. The lads did not know whether he was hurt or not, but they did see that he was using his gun and firing at the monoplane.

But the gunman whom Jim Spenser had wounded seemed to have been given a new lease of life. Apparently he forgot the pain of the wound in his leg and raced towards the monoplane. He reached it and the bearded man helped him in. A moment later the cabin door slammed and the machine began to move along the ground. It went very quickly, bumping over the uneven surface for a few seconds, and then its pilot pulled back on the stick and the machine soared upwards. Mark Gresham was still firing, and they heard two or three bullets rattle against the metal body of the monoplane, but they did no serious damage. A few minutes after the lads had left the restaurant, the monoplane, with its crew of crooks, was well in the air, and it seemed to the two lads that there was not a chance in a thousand of preventing a get-away.

But Mark Gresham was on his feet, and he shouted quickly:

"Look after Bob you two. I'll see you soon."

As he spoke he cut across to one of the hangars, outside which a second monoplane with three or four startled mechanics were standing. Jim Spenser and Peter Mason realised what he was going to do. He was going up after the crooks —a chase by air!

It was Jim who spoke first.

"One of us must go with him," he snapped. "I'll toss you who looks after Bob Denver and who goes up."

As he spoke he pulled a copper out of his pocket and spun it in the air. Peter called heads, but it came down tails.

"This isn't my lucky day," he said, but he smiled cheerfully enough. "Scoot after him, Jim."

Jim needed no encouraging. He reached the monoplane a few seconds after Mark Gresham had entered, and while the mechanics were pulling away the wooden chocks—which were fitted to keep the machine from being moved by the wind—he jumped in after the pilot.

Mark Gresham glanced round, and even in the circumstances he found a smile.

"So you want to find trouble, do you? All right, my lad—let's get to it!"

A moment later the monoplane trembled as the engines roared, and the propellers whirred.

In a few seconds it was bumping across the ground, and Jim Spenser was taking part in a chase by air, almost forgetful of the fact that never before had he been off the ground.

The only thing which worried him was the result of the chase. If it was humanly possible they had to catch the crooks!

CHAPTER VI

BACK TO EARTH

NEVER in his life had Jim Spenser expected to have the opportunity for flying so suddenly. Frequently he had dreamed of having short joy flights for ten minutes or so, and in his mind he had enjoyed them time and time again. By reading everything about flying that he could, he had a good idea of the actual sensation which a flight would give him, but now, as he sat back in a seat behind the pilot, he realised that his expectations fell considerably below realization.

The monoplane in which Mark Gresham had started in pursuit of the crooks, was a twin-engined *Victor* 'plane with dual control—which meant there was room for two pilots—and four passenger seats. The cabin was fairly roomy, and in the rear was a compartment where passengers' luggage could be carried. Jim noticed these things, but not until afterwards—when he was talking with Peter Mason—did he remember them.

For the moment the only thing that mattered was that he was going up in the air. He felt the slight bumping of the machine as it ran along the ground, and then he saw the pilot pull back

on the joy-stick and the nose of the machine pointed upwards. They must have been travelling at about seventy miles an hour when the wheels of the monoplane left the ground. Immediately Jim Spenser experienced an eerie sensation, for the bumping had completely disappeared and they were flying so smoothly that they seemed to be standing still. The hangars of the aerodrome were out of sight, but the hedges and trees lining the air-field flashed past, a couple of hundred yards away.

And then suddenly—so quickly that he hardly realised what had happened—the trees dropped below the monoplane.

Now he glanced out of the cabin window, seeing the green fields spread out below him, and as every second passed the machine climbed several hundred feet. Motion at such a speed was something he had often read about, but he had never conceived that it was anything like this. For almost in a twinkling of an eye the fields looked like little patches, the hangars were no more than small white dots, and it was impossible for him to see the dozen or more men who were standing about the air-field. It passed through his mind that somewhere down there Peter Mason and the injured Bob Denver were lying, and then he forced himself to forget everything but the job in hand.

They were in the middle of a serious task, and this was anything but a joy flight. He took

himself to task for being as thoughtless as he had.

Mark Gresham was sitting at the controls, his face relaxed, and looking for all the world as though there was nothing out of the ordinary happening. The pilot had glanced round several times, and seen the youngster staring over the side of the cabin, and he had realised something of what was passing through Jim's mind.

As the youngster looked round Mark broke the silence.

"Enjoying it, my son?"

"This is a wonderful experience," said Jim Spenser. "But I'm more worried about the men in front of us."

Mark Gresham smiled.

"The time for worrying about them will come later. We won't catch up with them for at least ten minutes—if at all."

"Do you seriously think they'll get away?" asked Jim.

"It's certainly possible," said Mark Gresham. "I noticed the machine that they went off in, and it's a very powerful *Drakker* 'plane, capable of well over two hundred and fifty an hour."

"Two hundred and fifty miles an hour!" Jim gasped in surprise. "I thought only the battle 'planes could touch speeds like that, and Scouts."

"The *Drakker*," said Mark Gresham, with a smile, "is built on the same lines as the most powerful German Air Force 'plane. Some of

them are so tuned up that they touch nearly three hundred miles an hour."

Jim was silent for a moment; he glanced at the air-speed indicator—which he was able to recognise from illustrations which he had seen so often—and he saw that the needle was quivering between the two hundred and ten and two hundred and twenty mark.

"What's the limit of speed of this machine?" he asked.

"It's not likely to do more than two hundred and thirty," said Mark Gresham, "and that's fast enough for all commercial purposes. But whether it's going to be any good in a trip like this I don't know." The pilot's face grew more serious, and but for the twinkle in his eyes Jim would have been worried by his next words:

"And that reminds me that I have a bone to pick with you, young fellow. What the dickens do you mean," asked Mark Gresham, "by getting into this 'plane like you did? If your parents had any idea what you're doing you'd probably get it properly in the neck."

For a moment Jim did not answer, and then in a very low voice he said:

"I have no parents, Mr. Gresham."

The other man wished heartily that he had never said what he had. On the other hand, it would have been impossible for him to know that Jim was an orphan, and Jim realised that there had been not the slightest intention to

cause him any discomfort. There was a brief silence, and then Mark Gresham went on more gently:

"All the same, old son, you oughtn't to have busted in as you did."

Jim shrugged his shoulders a little and answered quietly:

"I just didn't think. I knew you were going up alone and I thought it better for someone to be with you—I tossed Peter who was coming with you, and he was not the lucky one, Mr. Gresham."

To the youngster's surprise Mark Gresham burst into a loud laugh. The idea of two schoolboys acting so quickly while he had raced to the machine, and tossing up as to who should have the privilege of flying, tickled his sense of humour. When he stopped laughing he said cheerfully:

"It's good to have you with me anyhow, young fellow. The trouble is that this business might be a bit dangerous, and I don't want you or your friend to get hurt. But we can talk about that later."

For a few moments silence reigned in the cabin of the monoplane and Jim Spenser had time to glance out of the windows again. And now thousands of feet below him he could see the spreading countryside, with its different coloured fields—some yellow, some dark green, some light green, and others between colour—

and almost immediately below him he saw the huddled buildings which obviously represented some big city.

Mark Gresham saw where he was looking, and supplied the information.

"That's Winchester," he said. "We're heading almost due east."

"Do you still think there's any chance of catching the others up?" asked Jim.

"I'm beginning to doubt it," said Mark Gresham, and the youngster saw that the flier was feeling very grim whenever he thought of the men they were chasing. "We've been up ten minutes or more and there's no sign of them."

Jim knew that this was true. Ahead of the monoplane stretched the great expanse of blue sky, and as far as human eye could see there was not a sign of anything on the horizon. Twice in the next few minutes Mark Gresham used long-distance glasses, but still he could see nothing. Jim Spenser had a hard job suppressing his disappointment:

"So they *have* beaten us," he said glumly.

Mark Gresham chuckled.

"They've got away this time," he said, "but thanks to your circus act with the crockery they didn't get what they wanted."

Jim drew a deep breath, and then suddenly put the question.

"What *did* they want?" he asked.

The pilot did not answer immediately, but

after a pause which lasted for thirty seconds, and yet seemed to drag out much longer, he said, very slowly:

"Strictly between you and me, Jim, they wanted to kill me. I've had a lot of trouble with that particular gang in the past few weeks."

Jim nodded and his eyes gleamed.

"That's why you had trouble in the air, earlier in the day, isn't it?"

"Hallo!" said Mark Gresham, "who's been whispering in your ear, young man?"

Jim told him what he had overheard, and Mark Gresham nodded slowly, and shrugged his shoulders.

"That was an attempt to bring me down," he said, "and as Garton said I'm a lucky man to be alive. Garton was the lean-faced man you heard talking."

Jim had gathered that, and he nodded. It had seemed to him that Mark Gresham was in a talkative mood, and that probably his questions would not be unwelcome. All the time, there was a tremendous curiosity in his mind, tinged with excitement.

"Why on earth should anyone want to kill you?"

Mark chuckled again, and Jim was impressed perhaps more than he had been before by the strength of the pilot's features. He told himself that he would not like to be in anyone's shoes who made an enemy of Mark Gresham.

"There're a dozen reasons why people take to murder," said the pilot, "but the simplest way of explaining to you is to say that these fellows want me to disappear because I know something that could do them infinite harm."

Jim nodded and prepared to be fully satisfied with that explanation. Actually he was bursting with curiosity. What knowledge could Mark Gresham have which was of such importance that men would be prepared to make such desperate attempts to kill him?

It was a question which the youngster realised would probably never be answered. Already the airman had been exceptionally patient and good-tempered, and Jim could not expect to have any other questions settled. Moreover, he realised that he had inclined to talk too much, and the last thing he wanted to do was to create in Mark Gresham's mind the impression that he was interfering in any way.

As it happened, Mark Gresham considered that the youngster was behaving very well indeed. More than that—the airman was conscious of a very deep gratitude. He knew that had the two lads not had the presence of mind to hurl the crockery against the door when they had been in the restaurant, he would probably have been dead. Without mincing words, he admitted that he owed his life to Jim Spenser and Peter Mason. Because of that, the gratitude

which he had felt earlier in the day was considerably deeper.

It was a fact that he was in danger; it was also a fact that he had half expected the shooting, although he had not expected that it would take place at the aerodrome, and he had been convinced that the engine trouble had been deliberate, even before Garton had told him. Garton, as Jim Spenser learned soon afterwards, was the manager of the Hockley Airways.

The pilot wanted to do something that would repay the youngsters for the way which they had helped him, but on the other hand he was very anxious indeed that they did not take any risks. He was almost sorry that he had promised to take them up in the air, but that promise being made, he determined that he would keep it.

For the moment he decided to test Jim Spenser's powers of observation.

"Did you notice anything strange about the two men?" he asked.

"They all seemed shorter than the average," said Jim Spenser.

"Anything else?"

"They seemed dark-skinned," said Jim, racking his mind for anything which had been unusual about the two gunmen.

"What I was doing," said Mark Gresham with a chuckle, "was to see whether you *had* noticed anything unusual. They were dark-

skinned—and they were all rather shorter than the average."

"Is there some meaning behind that?" asked Jim.

"I don't know whether you'd call it a meaning," said Mark Gresham, "but there's an explanation. All those fellows come from the same place."

"Whereabouts?" asked Jim, the question coming before he could remind himself that he had promised to restrain his curiosity.

"They come from a little country in between India and Persia," Mark Gresham told him. "It's rather a queer place in many ways, and there's quite a history to it that I'll tell you a bit later on. I don't think you ought to leave your friend out of all the fun, do you?"

"Of course not," said Jim quickly, and he told himself that both he and Peter Mason were in for a good time when Mark Gresham told them the story.

By now Mark Gresham had decided that it was quite impossible for them to catch up with the 'plane that had carried off the gunman. He turned the monoplane round in a wide bend and headed back for the aerodrome. From time to time he pointed out places of interest which Jim knew well enough by reputation, but which he would never have recognised from the air. Winchester Cathedral, the great public school —against which Jim had hopes of playing cricket

one day—the military aerodrome some three miles outside Winchester, and other smaller towns over which they were flying. By now the sun had set, sending great yellow streamers across the heavens, lighting the trees below and giving them a glory which was greater than anything Jim had ever imagined. There was something magic about the whole thing, and when, at last, Mark Gresham pointed out the Hockley Aerodrome, Jim drew a deep breath. The magic spell of that quarter of an hour's flying was broken.

He had wondered how the monoplane would behave when it landed, but he quickly found that it was as simple as taking off.

Mark Gresham did not falter once. He took the monoplane down very easily, and then the earth seemed to rush up and hit them. The wheels bumped a little on the ground and then the monoplane settled down. For a few moments they ran along the uneven surface of the field with half the power of the engine on. As they finally taxied to a standstill, Jim looked out of the cabin window and saw Peter Mason hurrying across the field towards him.

So Peter was still all right.

He was wondering how Bob Denver was getting on, and whether he had been badly hurt or not, but he knew that it would not be long before he learned just what had happened. All the time, although he tried to prevent him-

self from thinking about it, his mind was seething with a hundred queries. Above all of them was the great question—what did Mark Gresham know about the men from the little Asiatic country which he had mentioned? What mystery had the two lads bumped into? And—although Jim told himself that it was absurd even to hope—was it possible that the two lads would discover even more about them?

He determined, if it was humanly possible, to do so.

CHAPTER VII

ORDERS FOR TWO

WHEN the pilot and Jim Spenser reached the offices of the aerodrome, they learned that Bob Denver was certainly not badly hurt. He was sitting in a small private room—which the lads learned was reserved for senior pilots in the Air-line Service—and looking very down in the mouth. He stood up as the new-comers entered, and then grimaced as a stab of pain shot through his injured leg.

"How are you feeling?" asked Mark Gresham.

"I'm feeling sore in more ways than one," said Bob Denver. "The blighter punctured my leg, but it'll be all right in a couple of days. If it had been a couple of inches right or left he'd have missed me and I'd have had him."

"We've got one of them," said Mark Gresham. "We mustn't be greedy. Have you seen him?"

It was a remarkable fact that Jim Spenser had completely forgotten that one of the little dark men had been captured. This man—the one Mark Gresham had shot during the first exchange of bullets—was in one of the beds in the aerodrome dormitory.

"I've not tried to get any information out of

him," said Bob Denver, who was obviously not sure how much to say in front of the youngsters, "for he's pretty badly hurt. The doctor has been with him, and he says he won't be able to talk for another twelve hours."

"It won't do us any harm to wait for a few hours," said Mark Gresham quickly. Then his face lightened and he chuckled. "If we keep on talking like this, Bob, we shall have these two lads dreaming about us all night. Seeing you can't drive I'll run them to their cottage."

Bob Denver nodded and looked serious.

"Will it be safe?" he asked.

"I don't think there'll be any more danger to-night," said Mark Gresham. "In any case I'll be looked after."

He did not enlarge on his words, although Jim Spenser and Peter Mason were wondering what he meant by the words "looked after." Apparently Bob Denver had told Peter Mason some of the story that Jim had been told and both lads were seething with excitement. It seemed a fantastic dream that they could have been plunged into anything like this. Each lad's mind registered very vividly that exciting battle in the restaurant, with bullets flying while they had crouched for safety behind the table.

What strange mystery were the fliers mixed up in that such measures should be taken?

They had little time for thinking, for very soon Mark Gresham got up, and with Bob Denver

hobbling after them, they went outside and found a powerful Talbot car waiting. The two lads climbed in the tonneau while Mark Gresham sat in the driving seat and let in the clutch. The Talbot moved off, while Bob Denver, looking very down in the mouth, waved after them. Very little was said during the journey, apart from things that touched the ride itself. Mark Gresham did not know the district very well, and he had to ask time and time again which way to turn. The situation was complicated because neither of the lads were too sure where they were going, but luck or judgment got them eventually to the village of Enbury, and from there on it was easy going.

Mark Gresham came to the door of the cottage with them. Mrs. Maybell, the housekeeper, had been waiting in the front parlour, and she opened the door in a terrible flurry.

"Lawks a mercy!" she exclaimed, "I wondered where you'd got to."

"They've been all right," Mark Gresham assured her, and his smile did more than anything the boys could have said to re-assure her.

The two lads invited the pilot to have a cup of tea, but Mark Gresham was in a hurry to get off, and very soon the Talbot drove away.

They were able to tell the housekeeper something of their adventures, although they did not dare to breathe a word about the shooting. Apart from that, however, the day had been

exciting enough. Starting off so dismally with the long, tiring walk, then the biplane which had crashed, the brave pilot who had jumped from the falling 'plane, the way the parachute had dragged him along the ground and they had hurried to his rescue, all of this made exciting telling. Mrs. Maybell interspersed an occasional exclamation of surprise, but for the most part the two lads recounted the story with little interruption.

When Jim had admitted that he had been up in the air she seemed horrified. Just as the other kindly woman, Mrs. Crabtree and her husband had been, she was terrified of aeroplanes, and believed that no one who went up in the air could possibly be safe.

Soon after nine o'clock, the two lads, absolutely tired out, went upstairs to bed. Another two hours passed before they finished talking. Jim fell to sleep first, Peter was not long after him, and they slept very soundly, and did not wake up until Mr. Maybell banged on their door at eight o'clock the next morning, and uttered his usual morning cry "tea's waiting outside, my lads."

Mr. Maybell was a character. A man of about sixty, he had been a prosperous farmer for many years, farming one of the estates which Peter's wealthy father owned. A very serious illness had unfitted him for the rigours of farming life, and consequently Mr. Mason had arranged

for him to look after the cottage, with his wife, to make sure the old man was not entirely dependent on charity. To look at, Frank Maybell was tall, very broad, with a remarkably handsome face and snow-white hair. He had very definite opinions about various things, and it was typical of him that although he would take a cup of early morning tea up to the two lads he insisted that they should get out of bed to collect it. Sometimes Mrs. Maybell would slip upstairs and take it in to them, and for the rest of the day the old man would be shaking his head and grumbling at the way in which she spoilt them, and claiming that she would make them "soft." Obviously Frank Maybell could not bear to think of any man who wasn't as hard as nails. He had led a vigorous life, and he sometimes boasted that only when he had been ill had he had anything to eat in bed.

Everything considered, however, the lads liked the old fellow, and they knew he was thoroughly reliable.

Both lads would have given a lot if they could have expected Mark Gresham to call for them that morning. They had to wait another twenty-four hours, however, before they could possibly see him. They discussed what they should do for the day, and they decided that a walk across the fields would be enough before dinner—as Mrs. Maybell insisted on calling the midday meal—and the afternoon could look after itself.

It was not long before they were heartily glad that they had not decided to go out for the whole day.

Soon after ten o'clock, just before they started off for their tramp, a car drew up outside the cottage. This was indeed a rarity. Apart from one or two tradesmen's vans, whose noisy engines could be heard a mile off, very few cars pulled up outside the little house. The lads were in their bedroom, looking through an encyclopædia of aviation, and as soon as they heard the squeal of brakes they rushed to the window.

Had Mark Graham come to-day?

They saw in a moment that it was not the pilot, but both of them recognised the powerful Rolls which was standing outside, and as Peter Mason saw the lean, grey-haired man who climbed out, he shouted through the open window in high glee:

"Hallo there, Dad!"

Mr. Mason—for it was he—looked up smilingly. He was a tall man, and even from the window Jim Spenser could see the remarkable likeness between him and his son. Apart from the fact that Mr. Mason was very much older, they were practically alike, feature by feature.

Neither lad had expected this visit, and as both of them admired and respected Mr. Mason with equal warmth, they were delighted. They went downstairs, and reached the door as Mrs. Maybell hurried along the passage. She was wiping

the flour from her hands on her apron. She beamed as she saw the two youngsters hurrying down the rickety stairs, and was only too glad to hurry back into the kitchen to make herself more respectable for so distinguished a caller.

Peter opened the door, and a minute later was gripping his father's hand. Jim shook hands with the older man as well, and the three of them went into the front parlour.

"Why on earth didn't you let us know you were coming?" Peter asked. "We might have been out for the day."

"I didn't know I was coming until very late last night," said Mr. Mason, "so I couldn't tell you. Well, you young rips, what have you been up to?"

"Up to?" echoed Peter. "How do you mean?"

The older man chuckled.

"You were going great guns yesterday, weren't you?"

Jim Spenser and Peter Mason were astonished beyond words at the discovery that Mr. Mason knew anything about their adventures of the previous day. It had been too late for them to write to him, and they could not conceive how the information had been passed on. The older man saw the look of surprise on both their faces, and did not keep them long in suspense.

But he was no longer smiling.

"A very important Government official," he

said slowly, "came to see me last night. I know him very well, and he had been given information from Scotland Yard about the shooting that took place at the aerodrome yesterday."

"So you *know* about it," Peter gasped.

"I thought that would be a shock for you," said Mr. Mason. "Yes, I know just what happened. The affair was, of course, reported to the local police, who considered it of sufficient importance to contact immediately with Scotland Yard. Naturally your names were both mentioned in the report."

"It doesn't seem possible!" exclaimed Jim Spenser.

"It happened nonetheless," said Mr. Mason. "More than that," he went on, "it's very serious. I've been told in strict confidence that the affair was one of a series of such attacks made by a certain desperate gang of foreigners, and I was told that if I were wise I should make sure that you two youngsters left this place as soon as possible." As Mr. Mason stopped speaking he eyed the others speculatively, wondering how they would re-act. Truth to tell he had half expected what they would do.

Both Jim Spenser's and Peter Mason's faces dropped ludicrously. They looked the most disappointed youngsters in the world. For the moment it was quite impossible for them to speak, and Peter's father went on slowly, "I know it will be rather a blow to you, but it's

certainly not safe for you to stay here. However, I've been in touch with Mr. Gresham, and he's told me that he's promised to take you up for a flight to-morrow. Because of that I'm going to let you stay here until to-morrow afternoon. Then you'll have to come back to London, I'm afraid."

"Do you seriously think," asked Jim, "that there's going to be any trouble?"

Mr. Mason answered slowly but without hesitation.

"It's not so much a question of what I think, as that there is just a possibility of danger for you lads. Obviously I can't take any risks."

Neither of the others spoke for a moment. Both of them realised that Mr. Mason was very wise; more than that, they knew there was not the slightest chance of him changing his mind. Although in many ways he was very good to them, and he went to much trouble to be sure that they enjoyed themselves, he expected them to obey him in everything he said, and both lads respected his wishes. It was a disappointment, but after all it was madness for them to have dreamed they could play any part in the mysterious game which they had stumbled across by accident.

Peter spoke first.

"I'm not going to say I particularly like it," he said, "but of course we'll do just what you want, Dad."

"I daresay I shall be able to give you a fairly good time in London. However, I came down just to make sure you don't do anything foolish, and I want you to make a point of staying in or about the house until Mr. Gresham comes to-morrow, and I'll have Morris—the chauffeur—here with the car to-morrow afternoon at three o'clock. You can pack practically everything this afternoon or this evening and be ready to start off as soon as you get back from the flight."

These were orders against which there was no argument. The lads were as cheerful about it as they could be, and soon afterwards Mr. Mason went off.

When he had gone, and the youngsters were in their room, they were able to give vent to their feelings.

"If that's not the absolute limit!" exclaimed Peter. "I thought we were going to have some real fun."

"It's pretty miserable," said Jim. "However, I suppose we're lucky to have seen anything at all."

"There's that way of looking at it," admitted Peter, cheering up a little. "At least we've got the flight to look forward to. I wonder what time Mr. Gresham will be here to-morrow morning."

On that note they ceased talking, and began to get some of their things packed. Mrs. Maybell was also very sorry they were returning to London

but she knew it was necessary that they should obey Mr. Mason's orders. So, apart from the last great thrill, the two lads thought, their holiday with its culminating adventure was practically over. Doubtless they would enjoy themselves in London, but they would not have the same sense of freedom as they had down here. It could not be helped, but——

Had either of them had the faintest idea of what was going to happen in the next twenty-four hours their emotions would have been very different indeed. Whether they would have been pleased by the prospect of going to London and safety, it was impossible to say. Certainly they were going to have adventures enough to last them a lifetime!

For as dusk fell that afternoon three men, all short and swarthy—who would have been immediately recognised by either lad—approached the house. A mile down the road a powerful car was waiting. But no one, not even the villagers, had the slightest suspicion of the three men's intentions.

And then the dusk turned into the darkness of the night and silence reigned, broken only occasionally by the rustling of a light wind in the trees and by the footsteps of the three men as they neared the house.

CHAPTER VIII

NIGHT ATTACK

PETER MASON and Jim Spenser did not spend much time talking after they had climbed into bed that night. Their disappointment was keen, even though it was leavened by the expectation of the flight on the morrow. Neither of them complained again, but in their hearts they wished that Mr. Mason had not arrived, and given those orders which could not be disobeyed.

Peter Mason was perhaps more disappointed than Jim. He fell asleep after a quarter of an hour with a frown on his lean face. Jim Spenser did not get off for some time. He had always been the deeper-thinking youngster, and it amazed him that the affair at the Hockley Aerodrome should have been reported to Scotland Yard, that a Government official should have considered it worth while talking to Mr. Mason, and above all he was astonished at the fact that the authorities considered there was considerable danger to the two youngsters. Jim could have understood it more easily had he been living in the same house as Mark Gresham and Bob Denver. After the flight on the next day, however, he did not anticipate that he would see a

great deal of the two fliers. Why, therefore, was the danger considered so great?

Eventually he dropped off to sleep, while puzzling his mind over these things. The light in the lads' bedroom had been out for the past three quarters of an hour. Mr. and Mrs. Maybell were still talking downstairs, mostly about the adventures that the lads had experienced on the previous day, and the unexpected call of Mr. Mason. But a few minutes after Jim fell asleep the old couple toddled upstairs and very soon the last light in the cottage was extinguished.

It was a clear, starry night, but there was no moon. The trees and shrubs near the cottage threw long, mysterious shadows across the small garden and the roadway. Now and again a light zephyr of wind rustled the dry leaves of the trees and occasionally a twig snapped and dropped to the dry grass.

Silence reigned.

And stealthily through the silence the three men approached the cottage. One from the rear, one from the roadway and one from the left side. It was obvious that all of them had had a great deal of experience in woodcraft. Added to this, their lightness enabled them to approach the cottage with hardly a sound. One of the men was bearded—and both lads would have recognised him in an instant.

The man who had appeared in the doorway of the cabin, and who had wounded Bob Denver!

Half an hour after all the lights had been extinguished, the three men joined each other at the back of the house. The bearded man gave an order in a harsh, guttural whisper. The others made no comments, the bearded man retraced his steps and waited at the front of the house while the others started to work on the door of the cottage.

Had the task been given to an inexperienced man, to get into the Maybell's home, he would have found it practically impossible. It was bolted and barred soundly, for, like most country-folk, the old couple took no chances of marauders breaking in. Their chief object was to keep out tramps and poachers, and certainly they had never dreamed that such an attempt as that which was being made that night would come.

It was soon obvious that the two dark men were anything but amateurs. Using a small saw with a very thin but tough blade, one of them cut through the top bolt of the door while the other followed suit with the bottom. It was not long before the bolts were in two pieces, and all that barred them now was the strong but clumsy lock of the stout door.

Using a skeleton key—or a pick-lock—the taller of the two men fiddled with the lock. Had either of the lads been watching they must have been fascinated by what they saw. The man's movements were short, sharp and decisive. He did not falter once and in less than thirty seconds

the lock clicked back. A moment later they turned the handle and the door opened.

The marauders had gained entry!

One of the men took a small but powerful torch from his pocket and a minute later a beam of brilliant white light shot out. The crook was careful to keep the light down towards the floor so that there was no chance of any casual passerby seeing it. Stealthily, moving with that smooth, almost cat-like tread, he walked through the kitchen, then the living room and reached the foot of the stairs.

Then both men took the guns from their pockets.

The silence in the house was eerie. Like shadows the two crooks went upstairs, but as they reached the first of the stairs there was a loud creak.

The sound was like a pistol shot through the darkness. Both men stood absolutely still, and it seemed impossible that such a din could be created without attracting the people sleeping above. But as the seconds ticked by no sound came. The noise of the creaking board had been exaggerated in the tense silence. Taking each step very cautiously now, the two crooks reached the landing. There were three rooms leading from the landing, but one door was wide open, and it was quickly obvious that no one was there. Gently, moving as though they were afraid that any second someone might

see them, the men reached the first of the closed doors and touched the latch. The thing made a sharp noise when they opened it, and again they paused waiting tensely, making sure that no one had heard them.

Inside the bedroom Frank Maybell heard the sound and turned over in bed. In the country a thousand and one different noises were likely to disturb the silence of the night, the wind might touch the door and make the latch click as it had done, and he thought nothing of it. His back was turned towards the door. He did not see it open very slowly or see the two men who stepped into the room, guns in hand, and tiptoe to the bed.

One of the gunmen stood at the foot of the bed his gun levelled at the sleeping couple. The other man took a small pad of cotton-wool from his pocket and then tipped some of the contents of a small blue bottle on to it. He repeated the action with a second wad of wool, and then simultaneously pressed the two wads over the mouth and nose of the sleeping couple!

Mrs. Maybell did not stir. She drew a deep breath and then seemed to sink into even deeper slumber. But Frank Maybell half awakened. Feeling the pressure against his nose he made one spasmodic leap upwards. But the pressure on his nose and mouth was sustained, and very quickly the fumes of the chloroform permeated his nostrils and throat, penetrating deep into

his lungs; and a minute later he dropped back on his pillow, unconscious like his wife.

The two men grinned across at each other.

The first and most difficult part of their job was accomplished. They did not think there would be a great deal of difficulty in tackling the youngsters.

Perhaps they were more careless than they should have been. At all events one of them knocked against the door of the lads' room and made an even greater noise than any that had preceded it. In a flash the two men were in the room.

But Jim Spenser was awake!

The youngster had imagined he had heard a sound a few seconds before, and he had stared towards the door, seeing it open very slowly. He poked Peter in the ribs, and Peter woke up with a start.

"Look out!" hissed Jim.

And then the two little men flung themselves across the room at the two lads! Jim Spenser was out of bed first. So far he had not recognised the intruders, for the room was very dark, but he knew that this visit spelt danger. He did not hesitate, but flung himself at the first man, hitting right and left, and the fellow was driven back by the force of the youngster's rush. Had Peter Mason been able to get off the mark as quickly, the night's affair might have had a different ending. But Peter was still lying on the

bed when the second crook reached him; Peter did the only thing possible.

He lunged out with his feet towards the man, but the weight of the bedclothes hampered him, and before he knew what was happening he saw the man's swarthy face and glittering eyes very close to him; and then the butt of a revolver revolver cracked against his head.

Peter Mason uttered one strangled gasp, but made yet another ineffectual effort to fight the man off. He failed; and then a second blow sent him into a yawning unconsciousness.

Meanwhile Jim Spenser was fighting like a madman with the other crook.

For a few minutes it seemed he was getting the best of the duel. His fists cracked into the man's face sending him thudding against the wall, and before the crook could recover Jim had sent a terrific straight left on his *solar plexus*. The man uttered a grunt and sank towards the floor, his face twisted in agony. Jim swung round, but he was a fraction of a second too late. The crook who had already dealt with Peter Mason was just behind him, and that wicked automatic crashed down on the back of the youngster's head. Jim swayed on his feet. There was a terrible drumming in his head and a stab of red flame seemed to flash across his eyes. He made one wild swing at the man, but even as he did so consciousness was leaving him. His head was humming, his legs seemed weak, his

knees wobbled, and then he collapsed in a huddled heap on the floor.

The crook who had been so winded got to his feet a few minutes later, and glared down at the youngster who had so nearly knocked him out. Then with a snarl of rage he kicked Jim viciously in the ribs.

"The little pig!" he grunted. "When I get him home, I'll teach him!"

"We haven't got time for that," the second man snapped in a harsh, guttural English, "you take one and I'll take the other. Have you signalled?"

"No—I'll do it immediately," grunted the man who had kicked Jim Spenser. He stepped to the window, which faced the road, and flashed his torch three times. The white beam of light shot out, and then from the roadway came the answering signal from the bearded man. They heard their leader's footsteps as he hurried along the road towards the car which was waiting. By the time the two crooks had swung the unconscious youngsters over their shoulders and got them downstairs, the car with the bearded man sitting next to the driver was coming towards the cottage.

It was the work only of a few seconds to get the youngsters into the tonneau. To make sure they did not recover consciousness too quickly both lads were chloroformed—and then the car moved off with the four swarthy crooks from that

mysterious little country between Persia and India, and the two unconscious lads.

. . . . .

Some four hours after the car had left the cottage in Hampshire, it pulled up outside a large house in Surrey. The two lads were carried, fireman fashion, into the house, and the two men who had attacked them went into the rear of the house. The bearded man—whose name was Ben Addi—went immediately upstairs. He tapped on a door, and a smooth voice bade him enter. He opened the door and stepped in, but before closing the door behind him he bowed low in obeisance to the man who was sitting behind a large, bare desk.

There was a startling difference between the two men. Ben Addi was short, thick-set, swarthy and bearded. His black eyes seemed to glitter evilly, and his voice was deep and full. The man sitting on the high chair behind the desk was almost white. There was perhaps a slight yellow tinge to his face—something like that of a high-bred Spaniard or Arab. His eyes were yellow, and very large. He was dressed perfectly in European clothes, with one exception; a flaming red turban was bound about his head. His voice was smooth and unctuous.

"Well, Ben Addi? Has your task been completed?"

"The two boys are here, Highness."

"And was an alarm raised?"

"No alarm of any kind was raised, Highness."

"Are either of the boys badly hurt?"

"No one was hurt apart from the bruise from a blow on the head, Highness."

"That is good." The man in the red turban —whose name was Ben Mardi, and who held sway over a vast country and millions of people —smiled evilly. As he did so his yellow, pointed teeth—obviously filed in his youth—were bared.

"That is good," he repeated. "We shall be ready to start immediately the sun breaks across the sky. Have everything prepared, Ben Addi."

"It shall be done, Highness." The bearded man bowed again in that low, humble obeisance, and then withdrew from the room. Not once was his back turned from the man in the red turban, the man who seemed about to inspire fear by his very presence.

As the door closed behind him Ben Mardi's smile was vile—cruel, venomous. His long, yellow fingers, with their long nails, tapped an incessant tattoo on the desk. For the first time he believed he had a weapon with which he could successfully wage battle against Mark Gresham and Bob Denver, and if it became necessary, he would kill the two lads with as little compunction as he would have killed a fly.

CHAPTER IX

A CONSULTATION

At half-past seven the next morning Mark Gresham woke up in the small flat which he had in London, and found his man-servant —a man who possessed the astonishing name of Smiler—was holding a cup of tea on a tray in front of his employer.

"Hullo, Smiler, what kind of day is it?"

"A sunny, warm morning, sir, with promising tendencies."

"I'll give you promising tendencies," grinned Mark Gresham, "if you come out with a lot like that this time of the morning. What's the time?"

"Half-past seven, sir."

"I'd like the car outside by half-past eight," said Mark Gresham. "Any post?"

"Only bills, sir, and receipts."

"More receipts than bills, I hope," said Mark Gresham, and he waved the man-servant out of the room. He drank his tea and then leaned back on the pillows reading the morning papers which Smiler had brought, for perhaps ten minutes, and then he jumped out of bed and strolled into the bathroom, enjoying a quick shower and a brisk rub down.

Jim Spenser and Peter Mason, with a lot of other people, would have been very surprised had they seen Mark Gresham at that flat. It was an expensive place, in one of the most exclusive buildings in Mayfair, and only a wealthy man could have afforded its upkeep. In addition to the flat there was the man-servant and the chauffeur. Certainly Mark Gresham could not have afforded such expensive luxuries as a senior pilot in the Hockley Air-Line.

After a hearty breakfast, Mark Gresham was ready promptly at half-past eight and after calling good-bye to Smiler he went downstairs and climbed into the driving seat of the car. The chauffeur was standing by and Mark said:

"I don't think I shall need you any more to-day, Parrett, but stay at the flat until twelve o'clock in case I telephone."

"Very good, sir." Parrett saluted smartly and Mark Gresham drove off.

Smiler had said it was a beautiful morning, and it looked as though it was turning into a perfect day. The sun was shining down from the blue heavens, and, as the car hummed along the country roads, Mark Gresham was telling himself that it was a glorious day for the youngsters' flight. He proposed to call at the cottage before going on to the aerodrome, and he had already arranged by telephone to have a small cabin 'plane ready for him when he arrived.

It was a little after half-past ten when he reached the cottage. To his surprise the front door was not opened as it had been on the previous occasion, and on such a warm day he imagined the cottagers would have preferred to get all the air they could. Even more to his surprise there was no welcoming shout from the window. He had, in fact, expected both lads to be waiting for him in the garden or along the road. Frowning a little, although not dreaming what had happened, he approached the cottage and banged sharply on the door. Three other things surprised him as he reached the door. Two loaves of bread were on the step, two newspapers, and a tin can containing milk. He found it difficult to believe that the residents of the cottage would be so late in getting up, and consequently he rapped more sharply, his frown increasing.

No answer came.

After knocking again Mark Gresham began to feel worried. He hurried round to the back of the cottage, and when he reached the back door he saw in a flash what had happened. Perhaps for the first time the airman felt really scared.

The cut bolts—the open door—plainly revealed the truth. The cottage had been raided. Was it possible that the two lads had been attacked?

With his heart thumping Mark Gresham raced through the kitchen and up the stairs.

The door of the lads' room was open—he stared in and then stood absolutely still for a minute as though turned to stone. The beds were empty; in the room were obvious signs of a struggle. The dressing-table had been jolted and everything had fallen to the floor when Jim Spenser and the crook had knocked against it. The bed-clothes were tumbled, where Peter Mason had made his ill-fated effort to kick the crook off his balance, and everything was in chaos. There was not the slightest doubt what had happened.

His eyes grew hard and his lips set grimly as Mark Gresham walked from the room into the bedroom of the Maybells. Both the old man and the apple-cheeked old lady were lying very still, and a faint, sickly odour, pervaded the room.

Chloroform!

Mark Gresham knew just what had happened, and with his eyes blazing he swung round and hurried down the stairs and in a moment was driving the Talbot at a speed which had rarely been seen in the district.

. . . . .

Some three and a half hours later Mark Gresham and Bob Denver—who was still limping, and yet was so perturbed by the trend of events that he had decided to join his friend—and a middle-aged, grey-haired man, whose

name was Smart, called at Mr. Matthew Mason's business offices.

Mr. Mason was the Managing Director of a large firm of importers and exporters of various commodities, and the trio was greeted by a secretary who took Mark Gresham's name into her employer.

The offices were palatial, and hundreds of clerks were working hard. Mr. Mason did not keep them waiting long, and they were taken up in a lift to the third floor of the great building, and in a few minutes Mark Gresham was shaking hands with Peter's father.

Mr. Mason looked calm but worried.

"I hope this doesn't mean bad news," he said.

"I'm afraid it does," replied Mark Gresham, and he explained very quickly just what he had discovered at the Hampshire cottage.

The man named Smart said very little during the consultation, although he knew Matthew Mason very well. He was the Government official who had informed Mr. Mason of the shooting at the aerodrome.

The older man looked even more worried, but he kept his self-control.

"Just what do you think has happened?" he asked.

"It's difficult to say where the men have taken the youngsters to," replied Mark Gresham. "My big fear is that they will fly to Berran, and hold them as hostages."

"But hostages for what?" cried Matthew Mason.

Mark Gresham's face was very grim.

"It's absolutely impossible," he said, "for me to tell you just what the trouble is, Mr. Mason. I can advise you that it's a matter of great importance to the Government of this country and of others. It so happens that by accident" —this was not strictly true, but Mark Gresham was bound by vows of secrecy not to tell the whole truth—"that some information which will do considerable harm to the rulers of Berran is in my possession."

"Berran is the place that Smart told me about last night," said Mr. Mason, pushing his hands through his hair. "Just where is the country? It is somewhere near India, isn't it?"

"It's a country of about sixty-thousand square miles' extent," said Mark Gresham, "between India—Afghanistan—and Persia. The ruler is the high priest of the religion of the country, a man named Ben Mardi. As I say, I have information which if it's used in the right quarters will do Ben Mardi and Berran a tremendous amount of harm. In order to prevent me from using it, Mardi has been trying to kill me for some time past. It's quite obvious that when he discovered I was with Jim and Peter yesterday, he took it for granted that they were relatives of mine, and so he kidnapped them hoping to force my hand."

"In other words," said Mr. Mason, "Peter and Jim are in terrible danger unless you agree not to publish the information which you have?"

"That's the position," said Mark Gresham. "More than that, I have documents proving my knowledge. Ben Mardi will demand those documents in exchange for the two boys."

"And is it possible for you to surrender them?" asked Matthew Mason, and his haggard face and lack-lustre eyes revealed the extent of his anxiety.

"I'm afraid it's impossible," said Mark Gresham very slowly.

For a few minutes the two men eyed each other, Mr. Mason's eyes revealing the torment under which he was going, Mark Gresham's very hard and grim. Bob Denver and Mr. Smart said nothing. Neither of them would have been surprised had Mr. Mason given vent to an outburst of anger, blaming Mark Gresham for allowing the two youngsters to take part in this affair which was obviously of such immense importance.

But above all things Mr. Mason was a reasonable man, and he was an excellent judge of human nature. He needed no telling that Mark Gresham had meant well; he liked the man, and knew that anger was useless. There was only one thing to do, and he voiced it slowly.

"It's a dreadful affair," he said, "but obviously it couldn't be helped. If you're unable to barter this information and the documents for the lives of Peter and Jim then there's only one possible course for us to take."

"Just how do you mean?" asked Mark Gresham.

"We must get on the track of the man Ben Mardi," said Peter Mason's father, his voice deepening, "and we must get the lads back at all costs."

"You can be quite sure," said Mark Gresham, "that if it's humanly possible that will be done." Mr. Mason nodded slowly.

"Money is absolutely no object," he said. "I'm prepared to spend any amount to make sure those lads don't suffer and don't lose their lives. But—how can we discover where they have gone?"

"That's the big trouble," said Mark Gresham, "but let me say, Mr. Mason, that I shall look upon the expenses of a rescue party as entirely my responsibility." He waved aside Mr. Mason's protests, and added "I assure you, sir, that I've ample money, and no efforts will be spared. We know, incidentally, that Ben Mardi and Ben Addi—Addi is his chief associate—are in England with several of their countrymen, but we have no idea where they are hiding."

"What have the police done?" asked Mr. Mason.

"Every effort is being made to locate that hiding-place," said Mark Gresham. "It's just possible that we shall have some information within a few hours. In any case, should Ben Addi and Ben Mardi return to Berran with the lads, I have some friends in the principal city who will immediately report to me by radio."

An expression of relief crossed Mr. Mason's face.

"So we are not entirely in the dark," he said.

"No," said Mark Gresham slowly. "Directly we have any information at all we shall get after them. I'm practically certain in my own mind that the High Priest—Ben Mardi—has gone back to Berran, for he will feel that he can negotiate better from there than in England. In England, of course, he'd have to face enquiries from the police as well as from myself."

"How many men will you take?" asked Mr. Mason. "If you're in a hostile country surely little short of an army will prove effective."

"Unfortunately," said Mark Gresham, "the country of Berran is practically in an unimpregnable position so far as attack is concerned. Practically the whole of the country is surrounded by mountain ranges. The only possible way to attack is by air; should such an attack prove necessary the two lads will be in as much danger as the Berranese natives themselves."

"You mean that force is useless," exclaimed Mr. Mason, even more worried.

"I mean," said Mark Gresham, "that the only possible way to get the lads back is by stealth. You can rest assured that I'll do everything possible to get them. I shall take three aeroplanes, with three men in each, and all the men will have had a wide experience of Indian conditions. Added to that, I have several friends—you might call them agents—who will be in Berran to help me."

Mr. Mason nodded. It was obvious that he considered the affair was in capable hands.

"But supposing," he said, "you are unable to do what you hope, and rescue will be impossible by these methods. Would the Government make a demand for the return of the lads? After all, both Peter and Jim are British subjects and should come under the protection of the Crown."

Mark Gresham nodded, but his expression was grim. Bob Denver pushed his fingers through his hair, and then ran his forefinger along his hooked nose. It was Mr. Smart who broke the short silence which followed the older man's words.

"I'm sorry, Mason," he said, "but the affair is of such immense importance that it would be quite impossible for the Government to take any steps. I'm not talking without knowledge. The moment I heard what had happened, I went to see the Home Secretary and the Foreign Minister. Both of them expressed their sincere

regret that this had happened, but they asked me to tell you that in view of the circumstances any effort to get the lads back must be carried out privately."

Matthew Mason drew a deep breath; for a moment the others thought that he would at last give way to an outburst against the forces which were against him. But again he controlled himself and nodded.

"Well, I can only leave it to you, Mr. Gresham, to do everything possible. I will repeat that if you need any assistance in the way of money, everything I have is at your disposal."

Mark Gresham extended his right hand and gripped the older man's.

"You can be sure that no expense shall be spared, no risk shall be considered too great to get those lads safely back to England. I say that because I'm quite sure they are even now on the way to Berran."

A few moments later the three visitors left the offices of the worried industrialist, and Mr. Mason sat at his desk with his head buried in his hands. Mark Gresham and Bob Denver hurried to get together the rescue party, and then waited in suspense for news, which might come at any moment.

But they were afraid; they knew the devilishness of the men against whom they were opposed.

CHAPTER X

ACROSS THE SEAS

JIM SPENSER came back to consciousness some five hours after he had been subjected to the chloroform. He did not immediately open his eyes, for they were heavy and extremely painful. It seemed as though hot needles were stabbing into them, and through his head there were continual shoots of pain which made him want to cry out. He gritted his teeth, and did not move for several moments. Soon the pain in his head and at his eyes grew less. He tried to shift his position and failed, but at the moment did not suspect what was the matter. He could remember nothing. Just for that first five minutes all he was really conscious of was the pain in his head, and a dreadful heaviness in his arms and legs. His ankles and wrists particularly were painful, and it seemed to him as though they were badly swollen.

Slowly through his awakening senses came a low-pitched hum, something which he had never experienced before. At first he was inclined to believe that this was the result of the pain in his head, but soon he was convinced that it was something entirely different. It was like the

throb of a great dynamo in the distance, although the hum was more regular. After perhaps about ten minutes he dared to open his eyes. The immediate result was an increase of the stabbing pains, but by now a glimmering of what had happened before he had lost consciousness was in his mind, and he forced himself to look about him.

The scene that met his eyes was the most astonishing that he had ever conceived, and reacted on him like a douch of cold water. His body went very cold, and his muscles went taut. Like a man in a dream he looked about him, seeing the small windows of the cabin in which he was sitting, the backs of the three or four little men in front of him, and—what was worse—the billowing clouds and rain outside the cabin.

He was in the air!

For a few seconds he found it too much to believe. But very soon he was forced to admit to himself that the thing had really happened. He was a prisoner in a cabin of a large aeroplane, and even now it was winging its way across the skies, through wind and rain and storm, yet all the time keeping very steady.

No longer did he wonder what had caused that monotonous hum. The engines of the aeroplane were causing it, and had the doors of the cabin been open they would have sounded like thunder in his ears.

What on earth had happened?

Quickly now memory flooded through his mind. He remembered hearing the latch of the door click, and seeing the door open, he remembered flinging himself from the bed and going hell-for-leather for one of the men, and he remembered also the sickening thud on the back of his head which rendered him unconscious.

It was not hard to imagine the rest.

Still unconscious, and judging from the soreness of his mouth and nostrils, he had been drugged. Then he had been taken away from the Maybells' cottage, hurried to this aeroplane, and it had taken to the air almost immediately afterwards.

But what about Peter?

He did not see his friend in front of him or at either side, but by craning his neck round—at considerable cost, for the pain in his head started to throb again—he saw that Peter was in a seat immediately behind him, his eyes closed and his breath coming very heavily. What was serious, he saw that Peter's wrists were bound to the arms of the chair or seat in which he was sitting and that his ankles also were fastened to the tubular steel of the underpart of the seat.

Peter Mason was bound hand and foot—and he himself was in just as bad a plight.

Now he fully understood that pain in his wrists and ankles, for the cords which bound them were biting hard into the flesh, and his

blood circulation must have been stopped so far as his hands and feet were concerned. He wondered how long he would be in that terrible position, but more than ever he wondered where he was going and what would happen.

That he had been captured by the man from the country which Mark Gresham had spoken of, was obvious. He tried not to think too much about it, but he could not prevent himself from feeling a little afraid. There was something ruthless and remorseless in the way the attack had been carried out and he was afraid that the end of this grim adventure would be death!

And then he forced such grim thoughts away from him, and tried to concentrate on something more cheerful. That they were in the air was certain; in what part of the world they were flying he didn't know. They might be over England, over the sea, over the Continent—anywhere!

He had no idea how long they had been flying, it might have been a few minutes, or they might have been flying for the last three or four hours, but he was confident that Mark Gresham and Bob Denver would leave no stone unturned to rescue him and Peter.

And then it occurred to him ironically that according to plan he and Peter should have had their first air trip that morning in Mark Gresham's 'plane. They were having their first flight all right, but in different circumstances

from what they had anticipated so eagerly on the night before.

At this stage in his thoughts, one of the men in the cabin in front of him turned round.

Jim Spenser saw the swarthy, bearded man who had once fired at and wounded Bob Denver. He saw the man's eyes narrow, and immediately guessed the other was surprised to see him conscious. A moment later the bearded man's harsh voice broke the silence of the cabin.

"So. You are awake, eh?"

Jim did not answer; a fierce anger against the crooks surged up in his mind, although he realised it would be madness to try to do or say anything. He stared back at the man unflinchingly, and the other's mouth twisted.

"So you would prefer to be silent would you? You will soon change, my fine young friend, and when you are spoken to you will answer."

Still Jim Spenser said nothing, and the man's eyes flared with anger. He strode from his seat very quickly, took two steps across the cabin, and a moment later his open palm cracked against Jim's cheeks. A red weal seemed to leap into the youngster's face and the bearded man snarled:

"Open your mouth will you!"

Jim drew a deep breath, every fighting instinct in him roused.

"When I get out of this chair," he said very slowly, "and when my arms and legs are free

I'll pay you for that. I suppose you think it's clever to hit someone who's helpless!"

For a moment he thought that the bearded man would strangle him! The fellow gripped his throat and steely hands pressed hard. Jim was absolutely helpless, and he could not struggle or do anything to help himself. In front of him the evil twisted face of the bearded man seemed to get vaguer and vaguer with every passing second, and he felt his senses reeling again. But suddenly there came an interruption.

"That is enough, Ben Addi."

The voice came from one of the men who was still sitting a few feet in front of Jim. It was smooth, unctuous, and somehow very unpleasant. But at once it gave Jim Spenser a glorious reprieve, for the bearded man's fingers eased their pressure immediately, and then dropped away.

Through a haze which seemed to fill his throbbing head Jim heard the man say:

"As you say, Highness."

Then Jim saw the other speaker stand up and approach him. He was considerably taller than the bearded man. His skin was much paler, and Jim was strongly reminded of high-caste Indians he had seen in the streets of London from time to time. This man was smiling, but there was something frightening about it, even worse than the snarling and leering of the man he had called Ben Addi. Now both men were standing

in front of Jim, the bearded man perhaps a foot behind the other and a little towards the man's left.

"Your name?" asked the pale-faced man.

Jim had been able to defy the bearded man, but there was something about this fellow which made him a great deal more afraid, and almost before he realised what he was saying his answer came.

"Spenser—Jim Spenser."

"So. You have a certain courage, Spenser. It is always a pleasure to deal with men or boys who do not know the meaning of fear—but it is to be hoped that your fine friends will very soon accede to my demands, or I am afraid that even your lack of fear will be conquered."

Jim seemed to freeze. There was a threat in the words, and worse than a threat. He knew what the man meant; the fellow was telling him that unless Mark Gresham gave away that information which was so vital, he would suffer very badly indeed, and he did not feel any doubt about the ability of the man in front of him to inspire fear—fear through pain.

Yet, being Jim Spenser, his spirit was not crushed, and indeed the other's threat seemed to give him greater strength and courage.

"It's very easy to talk," he said.

"It is very easy for me to do what I talk about," said Ben Mardi, "but at least you can

rest assured you have nothing to fear until we reach my country."

Jim's eyes glistened. Without asking a single question he had learned where they were going.

"So we're on the way to Berran?" he snapped.

"We are on the way to Berran," repeated the other, "and I do not think you will find it so pleasant a country as you seem to feel. But that is of no importance at the moment. Are you hungry?"

Jim did feel that he could do with something to drink more than to eat, and he experienced a great relief at the thought that at least they were not going to be starved.

"I am thirsty," he admitted.

"For the time being," said Ben Mardi with an evil smile, "I will slake your thirst. Grannu!"

As he uttered the name, one of the men who had attacked Jim and Peter at the cottage jumped from his seat and approached Ben Mardi, bowing as he came. Jim was amazed at the way in which the others apparently obeyed this man's slightest wish.

"Yes, your Highness?"

"Release this boy's wrists."

Grannu bowed and slipped an evil-looking knife from his pocket, but before he could sever the cords which bound Jim's wrists, the bearded man interrupted.

"Your Highness, you will forgive me for questioning your order, but is it wise to allow

either of these heathens the slightest liberty? They may be dangerous."

The cold eyes of Ben Mardi seemed to sweep up and down the bearded man from top to toe. His voice was very smooth and somehow dangerous.

"When you are acting as my agent, Ben Addi, you are at liberty to use your own judgment. When you are immediately under my control you will bow to my judgment on every occasion. Do not make such a mistake again."

Jim Spenser was amazed at the effect of the other's words. The bearded man took a pace backwards and bowed low, spreading his arms fan-wise in obeisance. Jim Spenser saw the fear, almost terror, on his face.

"A thousand pardons, Highness!"

Ben Mardi—Jim knew the name of the man by now—did not take any further notice of the bearded man but motioned Grannu to continue with the knife. As the knife cut through the cords Jim's wrists felt easy for a moment, and then they were filled with a stabbing pain which was almost too much for him to bear. He knew that the circulation had been stopped, and now the blood was flowing through his veins it was causing this pain. His lips tightened and his eyes narrowed, but he did not make any sound. All the time the eyes of Ben Mardi were fixed on him, and although Jim Spenser did not know it, there was more than a hint of admiration in the other's expression.

"Yes," said Ben Mardi, "you certainly have courage, Spenser. It is conceivable that I will be able to find some use for you in my Palace. I——" He did not go on.

Jim Spenser hardly knew what happened, but suddenly Mardi and Addi went flying against the side of the cabin, for the aeroplane in which they were flying seemed to be taken in a giant hand and shaken like a rat! The man who was sitting a yard or two in front of Jim, at the controls of the machine, lurched from his seat, but managed somehow to get back, and Jim saw that he was struggling hard to regain control of the aeroplane. Ben Mardi and Ben Addi had bumped into each other and Grannu's knife had dropped and lodged against Jim's left foot. For a moment he did not realise it, for he was now filled with a real fear. For the aeroplane was being buffeted in a strong squall of wind which prevented the pilot from keeping control, and Jim knew that unless the man could regain control they would crash down to destruction.

And his ankles were tied—he would be absolutely helpless!

CHAPTER XI

A DESPERATE STRUGGLE

For a few seconds time seemed to stand still. Jim Spenser was staring straight ahead of him, the man at the controls was still struggling hard, the aeroplane was swaying from side to side, but if anything he thought it was rather quieter than it had been a few seconds before. The man, Grannu, was lying on the floor, but Ben Addi was lying across him, both of them obviously winded or knocked-out. Only the man named Ben Mardi was fully conscious, apart from the pilot, and without a glance at Jim he stepped towards the control seat, obviously ready to take over in case anything happened to the man who was battling with the elements.

It was at that moment that Jim Spenser saw the knife at his feet.

A fierce surge of hope flooded through his mind. He did not hesitate to take advantage of the situation. He did not stop to tell himself that even if he did get free, even if by some freak of chance he would be able to outwit the four men in the cabin, he would not be able to pilot the aeroplane. The only thought in his mind was that with the knife he could release

his ankles easily, and stand some chance at least.

He stooped down, picking the knife up quickly, and in a trice the cords at his feet were cut through. Again he experienced that dreadful sensation like red-hot needles stabbing into his flesh, but after a few minutes it ceased—and he sat still, with the knife in his hands.

The two men unconscious on the floor of the cabin, and the other two had their backs turned towards him. He stood up very slowly, very cautiously. The first thing to do was to see whether Peter was anywhere near conscious, and as he turned round he saw that his friend's eyes were flickering open.

Whether Peter had already suffered that few minutes of torture and was now reasonably fit or not, Jim did not know. He raised his fingers to his lips commanding silence, and then severed the cords which bound his friend. He bent down and whispered into Peter's ear:

"Go steady. Don't try to move until you feel you can. I'm going to try and knock one of those fellows out and force the pilot to turn the 'plane!"

Peter did not ask questions, although a dozen must have been sweeping through his mind. He nodded, and then Jim, with the knife in his hand, stepped quickly towards Ben Mardi and the other man whose name was Yogg. It did not pass through his mind to use the knife, but it had occurred to him that it would be useful

to keep the others in subjection for a few minutes. Before he reached Ben Mardi he glanced about him, trying to find something which he could use to knock the man whom the others called Highness into unconsciousness.

And then his eyes gleamed.

A few feet away from Grannu he saw a cosh —which he recognised in a flash. It was a strip of leather, perhaps eight inches long, thick at one end and thin at the other, and filled—he knew—with lead shot, little round pellets of lead which could be guaranteed to bring unconsciousness without doing serious or lasting damage.

Jim Spenser, his eyes agleam and with hope surging through him, bent down and picked the cosh up and then took two more steps towards Ben Mardi. If he could lay the man out the chances of success were considerable. With Ben Addi and Grannu unconscious—or very near to it—on the floor, they would present little or no trouble. He did not doubt the ability of Peter Mason and himself to keep the pilot in such a state of fear that he would unhesitatingly obey their instructions. Visions of the 'plane turning and battling its way through the elements towards England filled his mind.

By now the 'plane was almost steady again. The wind was still howling about it, thick mist was brushing past the windows, the rain was streaming down like a sheet of solid water. But

the aeroplane only swayed a little from side to side and the pilot had it properly under control.

Then, slowly, his heart thudding so hard he was afraid one of the men in front of him must surely hear it, he raised the cosh.

He needed only a couple of seconds to succeed in his desperate venture. Out of the corner of his eyes he could see Peter also getting to his feet and stretching his legs. Peter went quickly towards the two men on the floor and it was obvious that he would be able to handle them if they regained consciousness. The cosh was actually swinging down towards the back of Ben Mardi's head.

Whether it was the noise which attracted the attention of the High Priest, or whether some second sense warned him of the danger that was coming, Jim Spenser never knew. The cosh was only a foot from the back of the man's head, when Ben Mardi moved! Jim had never seen anything happen so fast.

The High Priest of Berran moved like a streak of greased lightning. One moment he was in the chair; the next he was out of it, and his right hand moved with incredible speed towards his pocket. The cosh swished over his head and Jim Spenser was taken momentarily off his balance. As he staggered forward he saw the gun which appeared to leap into Ben Mardi's right hand. For a moment Jim was afraid that a bullet would soon peck out, biting deep into

his flesh. He saw the evil smile which crossed Ben Mardi's features, but did not see the way Mardi turned the gun in his hand and made it into a club. But within ten seconds of the High Priest moving, the butt of the gun thudded on to Jim Spenser's temple, and for the second time within twelve hours the lad sank into unconsciousness.

Moving the gun like a conjurer handling the Indian clubs, Ben Mardi held it so that it pointed straight towards Peter Mason.

"Sit back in the chair," he said slowly, "or I will shoot you through the heart!"

There was such an intensity of feeling in his words that Peter Mason realised it was no idle threat. Had Jim still been conscious, Peter might have taken a chance. As it was, he knew it was useless to argue with a man who was holding a gun and who could kill him simply by touching the trigger. Very slowly he stepped towards the seat to which he had been tied only a short while before.

Ben Mardi's smile was evil, but there was still that hint of admiration in it. Whatever else, these two lads did not lack spirit, and the High Priest of Berran had always been an admirer of physical prowess. He did not speak; he stayed there with the gun trained on Peter, as though he was waiting for Grannu or Ben Addi to come to their senses.

While Peter Mason wondered what would

happen now, and Jim Spenser was sprawled unconscious at his feet.

. . . . .

The monoplane which was carrying the four Berranese and the two English lads from England to the Eastern country was the same machine that Jim Spenser and Peter Mason had seen during those few hectic minutes at the Hockley Aerodrome. On that occasion Ben Mardi had not been on board. Now he was, and with both lads unconscious again, he was able to review the situation coolly.

He was a man who hardly knew the meaning of fear, which explained his admiration for the pluck of the two prisoners. None the less his anger against them was cold and bitter.

For a few seconds he had been desperately afraid that the monoplane would crash. Had that happened he knew that there would have been no opportunity for him to escape with his life. The crash, whether into sea or on to the land, would have meant death and destruction for all the passengers.

Thanks to his abnormally acute hearing, and his remarkable speed of movement, he had been able to save the situation. He shuddered to think of what might have happened had the cosh crashed against his head.

Luckily Yogg was an expert at the controls, and he had not been flurried at all. The strong

squall which had descended on them with such fury was behind them now, and although they were still flying through wind and storm, the clouds were getting thinner. Ben Mardi believed that they would soon break through into better flying conditions.

They were five hours away from England—it was now about midday, English time, and the monoplane had maintained the stupendous speed of two hundred and fifty miles an hour. That meant that they were over a thousand miles away from England, but there were still two thousand odd miles between the monoplane and the country of Berran.

The High Priest and ruler of that barbaric country was an accomplished man of letters, for he had been educated at Oxford University, and moreover he was well versed in modern Western methods. The monoplane—called the *Warrior*—was fitted with the most up-to-date controls, while its petrol capacity was enormous. It could accomplish the long journey from England to Berran in two hops each of about eighteen hundred miles. In another two hours, therefore, the *Warrior* would have to land in order to take in fresh supplies of fuel.

Ben Mardi realised that in all probability agents of Mark Gresham would be on the look-out. He needed no telling of the speed with which wireless communication sped across the world. The usual place at which he landed

for fuelling was at Izmur, in Turkey. He was by no means sure, however, that it would be wise to land there, for Gresham's agents knew that he frequently dropped down at that Turkish city. Consequently he decided to take the chance of landing on the Isle of Crete, off the Grecian coast, where in all probability no one would be looking out for him.

He gave these instructions to Yogg, and it was not long before the monoplane began to lose height.

By this time Peter and Jim were conscious again. So were the other two Berranese, and Jim needed no telling that if Ben Addi had his own way they would have had short shrift.

Happily Ben Mardi was not foolish enough to kill the hostages, even had he desired to do so. They were extremely valuable, until he had obtained the documents from Mark Gresham and ensured that Gresham would never be able to tell what he knew.

Jim and Peter were sitting back in the seats where they had first recovered consciousness. Their ankles were tied again, but their wrists were free. It was a curious fact, moreover, that even in their desperate circumstances they could not prevent themselves from glancing through the windows of the cabin, and seeing the marvellous country over which they were flying.

By now the sun was shining brilliantly, the sky was a deep blue, deeper than ever they had

seen it in England. Far behind them was the belt of rough weather, and now there was practically no wind even at the ten thousand feet altitude at which they were flying. Beneath them stretched a vast expanse of green-blue water, immediately ahead the hills of the Isle of Crete were rising towards the sky. Neither lad had any idea of the part of the world they were in, but something about the splendour of the view beneath them held them spellbound.

Ben Mardi smiled his lean-lipped smile.

"You are interested, my brave young men?"

"Where are we?" asked Jim, ignoring the other's comment.

"You would be very interested to know, I have no doubt," said Ben Mardi. "You may also be interested to know that we are shortly going to land."

The Berranese was waiting for their re-actions and he saw the way their eyes glinted. He could almost read their thoughts, and he knew that both youngsters had immediately jumped at the possibility that there would be an opportunity presented to them for escape.

Ben Mardi had deliberately whetted their appetites for two reasons. One, with a natural cruelty he could not help enjoying the spectacle of other people suffering physical or mental pain. For another, he wanted to judge the real depth of the courage of these lads. He did not have much trouble in doing both of these things, for

their expressions showed that their misfortunes had not seriously affected them. He drew a deep breath, and said very slowly,

"Just to make sure you do not do anything foolish again, I propose to have you chloroformed. You will be getting quite used to that, won't you?"

The shock of the disappointment was too great for either lad to conceal. Ben Mardi laughed, a low-pitched, unpleasant laugh; and then he waved a hand imperiously towards Grannu, who stood up from his seat and took a small pad of cotton-wool from his pocket. The thing happened too quickly for either lad to struggle against it. Again they experienced the sickly smell of chloroform, again they felt their senses reeling, and then suddenly darkness came, and they lost consciousness.

Less than five minutes later the monoplane landed at one of the air-ports on the island. Ben Mardi left all arrangements to his chief assistant, and he did not get out of the 'plane himself. Consequently he did not see the broad-shouldered, red-haired Englishman who noticed the 'plane and watched the swarthy man get out with considerable interest. The man did not stay at the air-port long. Before the *Warrior* had taken off again, he was on his way to a small house some miles away and soon he was talking over the long-distance telephone to Mark Gresham!

The lads were still prisoners—but the hunt was up!

CHAPTER XII

OVER THE DESERT

THE *Warrior* was not at the Crete air-port for more than about half-an-hour. It took off again, heading straight for Berran, and it was not long before there was little more than a thousand miles to cover.

A thousand miles would have seemed a tremendous distance to the two lads in normal circumstances, but by air at the speed which the *Warrior* could maintain for hours on end, it rated only four hours' flying time. Allowing for slight deviation from the direct route in order to avoid some of the high mountain ranges over Persia, and also for any trouble which might develop because of weather conditions, Ben Mardi expected that they would drop down on to the capital city of his country in another five or six hours—or about eight o'clock English time. If he accomplished that, the whole flight would have taken little more than thirteen hours.

It was a great pity that the two lads had been forced to undergo this flight in the circumstances which had surrounded them. With a different companion, and fully conscious all the

time, they would have enjoyed it as they had enjoyed nothing in their life before. Even as it was, they did not find themselves cowed so much that they could not derive a certain thrill from the country over which they were flying.

Once again Jim Spenser had recovered consciousness first, but Peter had only been a few minutes behind him. This time their period of "sleep" had not the same ill-effects. A few minutes after regaining consciousness they were alert and able to look about them.

The *Warrior* flew over the mountainous country of Syria, and one great peak which they saw, and which at one time actually topped the altitude of the *Warrior*—which flew on one side —excited their awe more than anything else they had seen. Ben Mardi watched them with sardonic interest.

"You have never seen that before?" he asked.

"Never," admitted Jim and Peter.

"You will almost certainly have heard of it," said Mardi. "It is Mount Lebanon, and you will doubtless be aware that it has considerable interest for all students of your English Bible."

Peter and Jim recognised the name immediately, and for the first time they were able actually to visualise a place which had great importance in Biblical history, and to realise how little names helped. In plain words Mount Lebanon was ordinary enough; but seeing it, with its rocky sides towering into the skies,

covered with clouds and mist, was a grand spectacle.

It was Jim, whose geographical knowledge was greater than Peter's, who spoke next.

"That means that we are in Syria," he said.

Ben Mardi's teeth showed in his mirthless smile.

"So you are clever as well as brave, are you? And have you any idea where we are going, *Mister Spenser*?"

"I could make a guess," said Jim briefly.

"Then pray proceed."

"We are going to your country of Berran," said Jim quickly.

Ben Mardi's eyes narrowed. So the two lads knew something about the country, which meant that Mark Gresham had talked. His voice was even more suave than usual.

"So you know that, do you? Then I shall look forward to interesting conversation with you a little later on. It is just possible that the excellent Mr. Gresham has confided in you more than he should have done."

"He told us practically nothing," said Jim, on his guard in a moment.

"That remains to be seen," said Ben Mardi, his smile even more unpleasant than usual. "For the moment you will doubtless enjoy the scenery, and seeing that your information is so comprehensive, it will give me pleasure to act as your guide."

Although neither of the lads could see anything at all in Ben Mardi to like or admire, they found themselves fascinated as he talked from time to time of the countries and towns over which the *Warrior* flew. Not long after their conversation about Mount Lebanon, he pointed downwards towards a vast mass of white and grey buildings, and he said very simply:

"That is Baghdad. You will have heard of that."

Baghdad! City of romance and mystery! A place of fantastic legend, which they had heard about time and time again, until the very name conjured up the mysticism of the East. It seemed incredible that they were actually flying over the place, and even more incredible was the order which Ben Mardi snapped to the man at the controls.

"Lose altitude," he said in the harsh voice which he reserved when talking to his servants, "and fly over the city."

Yogg knew better than to disobey. Pushing forward on the stick, he sent the nose of the monoplane downwards until the altitude recorder showed that they were flying at little more than three thousand feet.

It was high enough—but the two fascinated youngsters were able to see a great deal of that mysterious city and capital of Turkey, scene of many wars as far back as the days of the

Crusaders, and even earlier. They saw the white minarets, the great domes of many buildings, the narrow streets which looked little more than thin pencil lines drawn hither and thither about the city, they could see little dots which represented people moving, and some distance out of the city, coming from the East, they saw a caravan of camels and donkeys. On the outskirts of the city groves of trees, dates, figs and other Eastern fruits, were dark masses against the light-coloured earth.

Without a word Ben Mardi handed each of the lads a pair of long-distance glasses. They thanked him—and that act of politeness brought a smile to his lips—and then used the glasses quickly. By focusing them properly they could almost imagine themselves actually walking along the narrow streets, mixing with the teeming crowds below, listening to the shouting of the mendicants and the tradesmen in the bazaars; they could see the bearded faces of men and the many veiled faces of women and girls scurrying about as though afraid to tarry, they could see the long white robes which some of the Turks affected, and in contrast the European clothes which others preferred. It was a strange place, different from anything they had ever dreamed of, and they would have given almost anything for the privilege of spending a day or two in the city itself.

But it was impossible.

Large though Baghdad was, it took them only a few minutes to fly right across it. Soon it was behind them, nothing more than a grey smudge on the land. And then Ben Mardi spoke again.

"Can either of you tell me where we are likely to go to now?"

Again it was Jim who answered.

"Aren't we near the Great Salt Desert?" he said.

Ben Mardi nodded, although the two youngsters needed no telling that Ben Addi and Yogg thought that their leader was mad to converse as he was doing with these heathen youths.

"We shall fly over the cities of Kashan and Tabas," he said, "but you will find they are nothing more than squalid towns, where flies and dirt predominate. That is to say, you will see it if we are able to fly low."

"Is anything likely to prevent us?" asked Peter.

"Very often," said Ben Mardi, "sandstorms of such fury send sand a thousand feet into the air. When that happens the only possible thing for a pilot to do is to get well above the storm and make sure that he does not fly into it. Sandstorms have been the cause of more accidents over the desert than anything else."

He nodded as he spoke, and it seemed that he was telling them that he did not desire to give them any further information. For a while

silence reigned in the cabin, while the two lads peered through the windows seeing beneath them the great yellow stretch of desert which lasted almost without a break for seven hundred miles and more. Jim knew, morever, that a few hundred miles on the other side they would be flying over Berran.

But they had not reached that country yet, and before they did so they would have to fly through one of the most terrifying experiences of their lives. They did not notice it at first, but they did hear Ben Mardi snap an order to the Berranese pilot, and they saw that Yogg was pulling back on the joy-stick. The monoplane began to climb rapidly, and soon they were flying at over ten thousand feet.

And then the two lads saw almost at the same instant the terrifying spectacle beneath them.

A tremendous cone of swirling sand, rising it seemed from nowhere, was just beneath them. They could understand when they watched, their eyes wide and their teeth clenched, why sandstorms were such a terror to fliers over the desert. It would be dreadful if the machine was down there, trying to fly through that whirling mass.

Thank heavens Ben Mardi knew the country well enough to be prepared!

And then, very suddenly through the silence of the cabin, there came an odd, spluttering noise.

Neither lad realised what it was until Ben Mardi snapped to the pilot:

"Which engine is it?"

Which engine! In a flash Jim Spenser and Peter Mason knew what he meant, and what was wrong. One of the engines was missing fire! There was engine trouble, and they were flying over what was probably the most dangerous part of their trip! And if the trouble was not quickly overcome, they might find themselves forced to lose height; if they lost height they would be flying amidst that whirling raging storm beneath.

Jim Spenser said nothing, and perhaps for the first time he stopped thinking of the possibility of escape—impossible though escape would be under the circumstances. It mattered little or nothing whether the lads contrived by some freak of chance to gain control of the cabin if the machine crashed. The only thought in his mind, and in Peter's, was the result of this battle with the elements and the engine trouble.

The machine was losing height fast, and they knew that they were flying at little over eight thousand feet. Strangely enough the peak of the sandstorm beneath them still seemed as far away, and each realised that it was not as high as they thought.

Ben Mardi, sitting in the other control seat, was snapping harsh, guttural orders to Yogg at the controls. For a few seconds the pilot had

practically lost control, but now he was cooler, and pulling back on the stick a little the machine straightened out and began to fly on a direct forward course.

But the engine was still knocking badly. Both Peter and Jim had heard a similar sound before, not only from the air when they had watched Mark Gresham's biplane before it crashed, but a hundred times on the road when motor car engines had spluttered to a standstill.

Was it humanly possible that they could overcome the threat?

They did not know; and to make the situation worse for them they were entirely dependent on the Berranese, for they themselves were helpless. Never before had Jim Spenser wished so eagerly to be up and doing.

At least there was some satisfaction in knowing that they were flying straight; but all the time the engine coughed and spluttered and any moment it might fail completely.

The thought was hardly in Jim Spenser's mind when it happened.

The faulty engine gave a final cough, and then dropped into silence. Only the hum of the remaining engine filtered into the cabin. Ben Mardi was looking very glum, and in the eyes of Ben Addi there was a fear which nothing could hide.

There were still nearly a thousand miles to go, several hours flying, and only one engine

remained to see them to their journey's end. If anything went wrong with that they would be finished.

Jim Spenser and Peter Mason did not realise the real extent of the danger, but Ben Mardi did.

He knew that it would be impossible for them to land at any air-field between the Great Desert and Berran without risking serious trouble with the authorities. That news of the lads' plight had been radio'd to every corner of the world was as certain as anything could be. Ben Mardi, then, was faced with the choice of going down to the nearest air-field for repairs and risking arrest, or flying through the air with one engine, over the tricky and dangerous mountains which bordered his country; and he did not know which to take.

Worse than that still—there was the possibility that the other engine would stall even before they reached any kind of civilisation.

These thoughts went through his mind quickly, and after snapping an order to Yogg, he turned to the youngsters.

"I am putting you on your parole," he said. "Have I your promise to give no trouble until we land?"

Jim Spenser and Peter Mason realised that it would be madness for them to refuse. Ben Mardi was offering them temporary freedom, and they accepted his offer without hesitation.

"Of course," said Jim Spenser, "I promise you

I'll do nothing to cause trouble while we're in the air."

"I give you my word as well," said Peter Mason.

Mardi nodded, and was satisfied that they would keep their promise. He snapped an order to Grannu, and in a few seconds the cords tying the lads' ankles to the seat were severed.

A question flashed into Jim Spenser's mind and he put it, very quickly.

"Why have you released us?" he asked.

Ben Mardi's smile was as tigerish as ever, and his voice was very smooth.

"There is just the possibility," he said, "that we will crash. I am prepared to do many things to you, my brave young friends, and once we get to Berran I shall not hesitate to put you to the test. But should we crash I have no desire to feel that you will be unable to extricate yourselves from the aeroplane. I trust I make myself clear."

Jim Spenser could not stop the words which came to his mind.

"I think it's jolly decent of you," he said.

Ben Mardi smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"When we are in a situation such as this," he said, "each man should have an equal chance. I——"

And then Ben Mardi stopped, and the smile was wiped from his face. Ben Addi grunted, Grannu suppressed a high-pitched exclamation,

the two lads went tense and only Yogg at the controls seemed to be unaffected.

For very clearly they had all heard a break in the monotonous hum of the remaining engine.

It was their one hope of safety. If the second engine failed there would be no alternative but to try to make a landing—and everyone of them realised the hopelessness of such a course if they dropped into the teeth of the raging storm beneath.

For perhaps thirty seconds there was no sound in the cabin but that monotonous hum, and the heavy breathing of the four men, and the two lads. Then, with a suddenness that made all of them jump, the splutter came again.

The other engine was failing! There was hardly a chance now of escaping from a dreadful death!

CHAPTER XIII

DANGER COMES NEARER

THE silence which had been broken by the involuntary gasps of several of the fliers, fell again. For a second time the engine seemed to pick up, and after another thirty seconds it droned as monotonously as ever. The *Warrior* went on without losing speed; although flying with only one engine, it had been travelling at a little more than two hundred miles an hour for the past ten minutes.

It was Mardi who broke the silence at last.

"We must go still higher," he said in English. "It is impossible for us to land down there, and we may get out of the storm at any moment."

Yogg nodded; the two lads watched him as he pulled back on the stick, and the nose of the monoplane pointed upwards. But they had not travelled more than a few hundred yards when the hum of the remaining engine was broken again, and the spluttering grew more pronounced. Twice the *Warrior* dipped, and it was increasingly obvious that no power on earth could force it to fly higher, for the strain on the single engine was too much.

"Straighten out," snapped Mardi, and Yogg obeyed, but he was not able to keep flying straight for long. The spluttering and coughing of the single engine was intermittent now, only a few seconds passing before it echoed through the cabin. Jim Spenser, unable to stand the strain of the silence any longer, suddenly burst out:

"Isn't there any way we can get at the engine?"

It was the kind of suggestion which Ben Mardi might have expected from the lad, and his smile was rather different from what it had been before.

"The only way to get to the engine," he said, "is to climb out on to the wings. Would you care to try it, Spenser?"

"I'd rather do that than stay here waiting for the end," said Jim sturdily.

"But you know nothing about aeroplane engines."

"I know a great deal about the ordinary combustion engine," Jim flashed back, "and there's not a great deal of difference. For all we know it might be something very small—one of the plugs may be giving trouble, or there might be a blockage in the petrol lead. If I could get out there I might be able to find it."

"Do you seriously suggest," said Ben Mardi, "that you are prepared to try?"

"Of course," flashed Jim Spenser, his eyes

blazing, "anything is better than staying here helpless—anything I tell you!"

Ben Mardi drew a deep breath, and then spoke in Berranese to Yogg. The lads did not understand what he said, but he looked at them again very quickly and spoke this time in English.

"I do not feel," he said, "that I should be justified in letting any one so inexperienced try to do it. But I must thank you, Spenser, for the suggestion. I am going to take the controls and my pilot is going to make the attempt. I need not remind you that you are on parole."

"I don't think it was necessary for you to say that," snapped Jim, whose spirit was as brave as ever.

"That is well. Yogg——"

The pilot surrendered the controls to his leader, and pulled his goggles down over his eyes. Then he tightened the straps of his helmet underneath his chin, and the belt at his waist. He did not look at any of the others, but he went to the left-hand door of the cabin—the engine on the left side had failed first—and opened it. The wind whipped into the cabin, stinging the fliers' faces and eyes. Ben Addi, who had seemed more affected by the danger than any of the others, gave a helping hand. Inch by inch the intrepid Berranese climbed out of the door, reaching for the wing. He found purchase at last and then he seemed to throw himself forward!

For a moment he sprawled over the wing, clutching wildly, and in that dreadful second the two lads thought that he had failed to obtain purchase, that he must drop thousands of feet to the earth below.

Then they saw that he was still there!

There was still a chance—still a possibility that the trouble would be righted. The lads had eyes for nothing else, and with the exception of Ben Mardi's every eye in the cabin was turned towards the man who was crawling like a fly along the wings. It was incredible, but it was happening. The *Warrior* was still travelling at two hundred miles an hour, and it seemed impossible that anybody could stay out there. But inch by inch Yogg crept towards the engine, and soon he was standing up, supporting himself by holding the engine casing with his left arm, and using his right to take the top plate off.

Every second seemed an age, every minute seemed eternity.

But he was gradually doing what he wanted; soon all the bolts were loosened, and he took them out one by one and slipped them into his pocket. His swarthy face did not change its expression one iota all the time he was out there.

With a great effort he lifted the top cover off the engine and swivelled it round, so that the actual engine itself was visible to the silent watchers. For what seemed an eternity he fiddled with it; then he looked round, and for

the first time his usually imperturbable face held an expression of excitement!

Yogg had succeeded in finding the trouble! Both Jim and Peter felt a tremendous surge of relief go through them, and it seemed to them that it would be a matter of only a few minutes now before one of the engines was going at full strength again.

But would the other hold out long enough for Yogg to make the repairs? It was still spluttering on and off, and the agony of suspense was incredible. There was a cold sweat on Peter Mason's forehead, and Jim Spenser was in no better state. He felt terribly cold, and he could not prevent his limbs from trembling. Ben Addi was staring in fascination at the man who was braving death out there, and Jim Spenser found time to tell himself that Addi was the least courageous of the Berranese.

Still the moments dragged by; still Yogg fiddled with the engine, and they saw that he was taking out each plug, one after the other, and testing it. He reached the third plug——

And then the dreadful thing happened.

The *Warrior* was suddenly caught in another of those heavy squalls, and it shivered from nose to tail. The force of the wind which met it seemed to come from beneath them and push the nose up until the machine was flying almost on its tail. Ben Mardi made a desperate effort to straighten it out, while the others stared in

awed fascination at the man who was clutching desperately at the engine and trying to save himself from crashing below.

Yogg seemed to be hanging on by his finger-tips. His legs were dangling beneath the wing, in mid-air, and he kicked out wildly, trying to get one knee on the wing again. Would he succeed or would that intrepid flier fail when success had been within his grasp?

Jim Spenser and Peter Mason saw what happened, and each of them seemed to go icy cold.

For a second gust of wind took the *Warrior* just as Ben Mardi had succeeded in gaining control. It was the last straw. They saw Yogg's legs waving wildly, they saw him slipping still further, and then his slender grasp was forced away, and he dropped down!

Down—down—down——!

It happened so quickly that it seemed like a dream. One moment he had been swinging and kicking; the next he was dropping downwards in a swift descent, that could only have one end. They watched him out of sight, turning over and over as he went, and then suddenly he was swallowed up in the raging storm of sand below.

And the cover of the engine was off, the engine was still out of action, and the other was spluttering even more than ever. It seemed that their last chance had gone.

. . . . .

When Yogg had left the cabin, the door had been shut behind him, and now the silence inside was complete. Hardly any of them were conscious of the whine of the wind outside, the spluttering of the engine was nothing to the thing they had just witnessed. To Jim Spenser and Peter Mason it was dreadful to think that a man could be whirled into eternity like that. Time and time again they had read of the perils of flying, but never had they experienced anything so grim and tragic as this. They might be with enemies, Yogg—he had been one of the men who had raided the cottage—might have been prepared to kill them without the slightest compunction if he were ordered to do so, but he had been a brave man and they admitted it.

It was Ben Mardi who broke the silence.

"So," he said, in a voice which was harder than usual, "it is over. We must salute a brave man, and I for one will admit that I could never do what he has done. Grannu——"

Obviously Ben Mardi was going to ask the other man whether he would make the effort to finish the work which Yogg had started. But Grannu's eyes were staring and his body was trembling. Ben Mardi's lips tightened before he went on slowly:

"I shall not ask it, Grannu, even of you. As for Ben Addi I need not ask whether he will take the risk. What I cannot do myself I shall never ask another man to try. We must force

ourselves, gentlemen, to hope that providence will see us through. We are beyond help of human beings."

While he was speaking the *Warrior* was swaying up and down, going from side to side, now flying in the teeth of a fierce wind. Jim Spenser glanced at the altitude recorder, and he saw that they were now flying a little under seven thousand feet. And the storm was very close to them, little more than a thousand feet below. He looked down, and in his mind's eye, could picture the falling body of Yogg as he went down to his doom. But even as he did so the determination was filling his mind, and at last he broke the silence which followed Ben Mardi's words.

"I will go," he said quietly.

Ben Mardi jerked round in the control seat and the expression in his eyes was one of disbelief.

"You mean it?" he snapped.

"I shouldn't have said it if I hadn't," said Jim Spenser. "Will you let me have a helmet and goggles?"

For a moment it seemed as though Ben Mardi was wondering whether to let the lad take the desperate chance. Peter Mason clutched Jim Spenser's arm, and it was in his mind to plead with his friend not to throw his life away. Peter admitted to himself that he would never have dared to take the chance. But something in Jim's

HE STAYED WHERE HE WAS, HIS EYES AFIRE, HIS GREAT HANDS CLENCHED

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expression and his knowledge of his friend, stopped him from putting the plea into words, and Jim shook his hand off gently and stepped towards the head of the cabin.

"So it shall be," said Ben Mardi in a very low voice.

Ben Addi—who probably would not have poked his head out of the cabin, grabbed a helmet from a box underneath his seat, and hastily fastened it on to Jim's head. Goggles followed and then Grannu, still shivering, opened the door.

The fierce gust of wind which blew in almost sent Jim off his balance. He felt a momentary qualm and a cold shiver went right down his back, but he had pledged himself and he would never back out now.

He began to climb out with the wind whipping into his face and small particles of sand stinging his cheeks. It was a strange fact, however, that as he left the cabin he felt much cooler and more capable than he had done a few seconds before. It would be child's play to reach the wing, and once there he felt he would have no difficulty in reaching the engine.

Child's play!

The wing was very close. A small step used for climbing into the cabin when the machine was on the ground was only a few inches from his feet. But he was a full moment before he found the step and dared risk putting his weight

on it. Then he took his hand away from the cabin and remembering how Yogg had acted, flung himself downwards over the wing. He thudded against it. All the breath seemed to be knocked out of his body. Desperately his hands clutched the far edge of the wing, and after a few seconds he realised that he was safe.

Safe for the time being at all events, he could say no more than that.

As soon as he had recovered his wind, he edged along inch by inch towards the engine. From the cabin it had seemed only a few feet, now it seemed miles away, but slowly the distance decreased. Then a grim determination filled his mind and he managed to clutch at the engine and slowly pull himself to his feet.

He was standing thousands of feet above the desert, standing in the same place as the man who, only a few minutes before, had crashed to his death. If the machine went into another of those wicked squalls he knew that he would be shaken off, and his fate would be the same as Yogg's. But he forced all thoughts of these things out of his mind, as he looked at the engine.

He thanked his stars that he had counted the plugs which Yogg had examined. Only two remained and he took them out with his right hand and cleaned them as well as he could. Whether or not anything else remained to be done he could not be sure, but he looked round at Ben Mardi and signalled.

They were going to put it to the test.

Jim hung on there, with the wind beating against him, feeling dreadfully cold, and telling himself that he could not hold on more than another few seconds. If the engine needed still further repairs, it would be impossible for him to do them. He prayed that everything necessary had been done.

And then very suddenly, very loud in his ears, the engine began to roar.

His relief was so great that he was hardly conscious of any thought. He just hung on there, listening to that deep roar, watching the engine as it vibrated, and as the seconds flew he told himself that he had succeeded. He glanced towards the cabin, seeing Ben Addi clapping his hands, Peter Mason waving one arm wildly in the air, and the smile on Ben Mardi's face.

But there was work to do yet.

He could not leave the engine open as it was, for it would soon be filled with grains of sand, and already the danger of sand getting in was great. He had a spanner in his pocket—Ben Addi had looked after that—and after slipping the top plate back he inserted the bolts and tightened them as best he could.

The engine was still roaring and he was reasonably sure that it would last for as long as they wanted.

Now all he had to do was to get back.

All!

There was still a terrible chance that a squall of wind would shake the aeroplane, that he would be sent down to his death! But he forced all thought of it out of his mind, dropped down again on his stomach and edged his way inch by inch towards the cabin door.

Soon he was able to stretch out his right hand and grab at it. Ben Addi and Peter Mason were at the door and they opened it quickly. Jim Spenser was hauled in, as gladly by his foe as by his friend, and a moment later he dropped on to the floor of the cabin, drawing in great gasps of air but supremely conscious of the tremendous triumph that had been his.

For the time being, at least, they were safe!

CHAPTER XIV

BERRAN!

THE calm inside the cabin was almost incredible after the fury of the storm outside. Jim did not know how long it was before his breathing grew easier again, and he was able to struggle to his feet, helped by Peter on one side and Ben Addi on the other. Soon he was seated in his chair, and a drink of hot coffee from a thermos flask seemed to give him new strength.

"It was wonderful, wonderful!" said Ben Addi, "you have an enormous courage, and I for one will gladly admit it."

"I told you that," said Ben Mardi from the control seat, "before he went out there. But I am grateful to you, Spenser, and I will not forget what you have done."

Jim Spenser forced a smile, although now the reaction had set in and he felt very little like smiling. He could not get the memory of Yogg's fall out of his mind, and in imagination he went through the same dreadful drop time and time again. It seemed as though the others understood something of what he was feeling, and he was left in peace. Peter was sitting next to him, and his expression took the place of words.

How long he sat there occupied with his thoughts Jim Spenser did not know. But at last he felt much cooler, and now it occurred to him that he had managed to alter the circumstances in which they were placed a great deal. He did not feel any great regard for Ben Mardi, but he needed no telling that the man was really grateful for what he had done, and he doubted very much whether the threats of death and torture would ever materialise.

If nothing else, the adventure had been justified on that account.

The second engine was almost completely dead now, but Ben Mardi told them that there was little more than four hundred miles to fly and they would be at Berran in a few hours.

By now they had left the sandstorm well behind them, and presently, as the *Warrior* winged its way across the skies, mountainous country stretched out on either side. Some of the peaks were even higher and more majestic than that of Mount Lebanon, and Jim—thanks again to his geographical knowledge—knew that they were flying over Afghanistan.

The sun was low in the heavens now, and darkness would fall almost at any time. They had very little time in which to watch the country beneath them, and to marvel at its grandeur. Both Jim and Peter had heard of the sudden darkness which dropped on the East, and they were surprised that the dusk,

although much shorter than in England, lasted for fifteen or twenty minutes. The sun, a short while before a blazing ball of fire on the distant horizon, was sending rays of a thousand different colours on the hills below, giving them a kaleidoscopic beauty which was greater than anything they had ever conceived. Here and there they saw water cascading down the mountains, illuminated also by that magic fire from the sun, gleaming gold and silver and a dozen colours, and even the spray from numerous waterfalls seemed to possess all the tints of the rainbow.

But darkness was falling fast now, and very soon they could see nothing beneath them, and only the stars illuminated the heavens. An hour had passed since Ben Mardi had told them they had four hundred miles to go and almost any time they realised they would be flying over Berran. Ten minutes later Ben Mardi broke the silence which had lasted for a quarter of an hour.

"We are flying immediately over the borders of Afghanistan and Berran," he said. "You are more welcome to my country than I had imagined possible a few hours ago."

"Does that mean you'll release us when we get there?" asked Peter Mason, who could not keep the question back.

Ben Mardi shook his head.

"There are few things I would rather do. It gives me great pain, now, to hold you as hostages.

But the issue at stake is one which is too large to be cast aside for personal considerations. All I can promise you is that your stay in Berran will be as comfortable as I can make it. But it is to be hoped," he added sombrely, "that Mark Gresham does not withhold his information too long. I am the High Priest of Berran, but there are others equally powerful, who might decide that it is essential for you to suffer in order to persuade Gresham. I tell you that, Spenser, so that you shall be warned never to wander far from the grounds of my Palace. That is enough."

He finished speaking, realising to some extent the effect of his words on the youngsters. Peter and Jim had been convinced that in Ben Mardi they knew the supreme ruler of Berran. Apparently this was not true, and they realised that even though Jim's stupendous effort had earned them the High Priest's friendship up to a point, the danger which lay ahead of them was not much less.

What would happen?

Would Mark Gresham submit to the Berranese ruler's demands? Or would they be left to the mercy of a barbaric race, capable of all kinds of torture and vileness? It was a thing which they could not answer for themselves. The only thing they could do was to wait and hope for the best. And with these forbidding thoughts in their minds, the *Warrior* hummed its way

across the skies and soon began to drop towards the earth.

. . . . .

Had it been possible for the two lads to reach Berran by day, they would have seen one of the most awe-inspiring spectacles conceivable. As it was they were shrouded in darkness and the only inkling they had that the 'plane was going downwards was that Ben Mardi pushed the control stick forward.

Both lads looked out of the window, and a few thousand feet beneath them they could see hundreds of flares burning brightly, while one large square place was completely surrounded by flares which shot tens of feet into the air.

Jim and Peter were close to each other and Peter said in a whisper:

"I suppose that's the landing ground."

"It looks like it," said Jim. "I wonder what's going to happen when we get down there?"

"Any chance of escape?" asked Peter.

Jim Spenser glanced towards Ben Mardi, and the others. They were too far away to overhear the conversation, and keeping his voice as low as ever, he said:

"I don't know, but if there's half a chance we'll make a break for it."

"You'll not take any notice of the other fellows Mardi spoke about?" asked Peter.

"We've got to take a chance sooner or later,"

said Jim sturdily. "I'll tell you one thing though, Peter."

"What's that?" asked his friend.

Jim Spenser spoke very quietly, but there was an underlying note of seriousness in his voice, and his friend knew that he meant every word he said.

"If one of us tried to get away we'd stand a much better chance than if both of us went together. I know that might sound silly, but don't forget this—if Ben Mardi knew we had both escaped he'd probably have every native in the place on the look-out for us. If he's still got one prisoner, he's not going to be so worried if the other gets away. Don't you agree?"

Peter Mason shook his head. Jim was familiar with that little gesture, but whereas in the past Peter had often objected for the sake of it, resulting in one of those little fierce quarrels which they had from time to time, Jim knew that this time his friend was really serious.

"I can't agree with that a bit," said Peter, still whispering. "This place is probably full of forests and jungles, we don't know a word of the language, and even if we did get away we might get lost and starve to death. If we were caught we'd be absolutely hopeless."

"I still don't see," said Jim, "that that's any more true of one escaping than both going together."

"Don't you see," said Peter Mason, "that if

one goes alone there's no one to talk to, no one to help, no companionship of any kind. If we go together one of us can keep awake and be on guard, we'll not be really lonely because we'll be together, and if one gets down-hearted the other'll be able to cheer him up. That's what I feel about it, anyhow."

Jim did not reply for a while and he looked out of the window thoughtfully. The flares were getting nearer now, and in the dull yellow glare that they cast it was possible to see a few of the men walking about inside the closed area. By two of the flares, moreover, he saw a long grey building, obviously the hangar in which the *Warrior* was to be garaged. If they were to have an opportunity of escaping soon after the aeroplane landed it would not be long before they had to get busy.

Jim felt tense with excitement. The only thought in his mind since he had returned from the wing of the *Warrior* was that of escape. In fact it had been on his mind from the first moment that he had recovered consciousness and found himself in the air. The enormous difficulties which must inevitably face them, the danger of starvation, of dying by thirst, of meeting some wild beasts and being torn to bits, of being surrounded by a band of savages who might, for all the lads knew, be cannibals—all these things passed through his mind, and yet were rejected. Mad it might be; but if it were

humanly possible he proposed to escape from Ben Mardi, and try to get back across the border into Afghanistan. Once there he knew that he would be directly under British protection and there was a reasonable chance that any natives he met would be loyal subjects of the King.

But one thing he did admit; Peter was right when he advised against one or the other making an attempt on his own. Of all the troubles which could beset them, the possibility of going for days—even for weeks—without seeing another human being, was the worst. Now Peter had pointed it out he realised he had been wrong. He smiled at Peter.

"You're right about going together," he said. "Keep your eyes open and if you get half a chance, run for it."

As he spoke the *Warrior* was within a hundred feet of the ground. Now in the powerful rays of the searchlight, it was possible to see the native workmen, the squat low building of the hangar, and the smooth surface of the field in which they were going to land. Down—down—down.

Ben Mardi proved himself an expert pilot. Now the machine was flying at a little over eighty miles an hour, and as it flashed along Peter and Jim could see the faces of the men standing on either side, and then they felt the first bump as the wheels touched the ground.

The *Warrior* bounced up a few feet into the air, settled down again and then went bumping along, until Ben Mardi closed the throttle. The noise of the great engine no longer filled the cabin, the machine taxied along until it came to a standstill only a few yards away from the hangar. Ben Mardi had judged his distance to a nicety.

But neither Jim nor Peter were concerned with that, however. Tense with excitement, they were waiting and ready for the least opportunity to escape. The whispered conversation had fired the imagination of both lads, and each of them knew that the other could be relied on to the very limit.

Ben Mardi opened one of the cabin doors, and Grannu stepped on one side while Ben Mardi's chief assistant stood on the other. Mardi stood back and bowed towards the youngsters, his sardonic smile more in evidence than ever before.

"Welcome to Berran," he said, mockingly. "You may precede me, Spenser. And you, Mason."

With thumping hearts the two lads stepped out of the cabin. About them was the dim light of the flares showing three or four mechanics who seemed interested in the engine, but not at all interested in the people who were getting out. Within a moment of the brakes being applied, both lads were standing a couple of yards from

the *Warrior*, while Ben Mardi was half-way out of the 'plane. Peter snapped the words, his eyes ablaze.

"Over to the right, Jim! There's no one there!"

And, without a moment's hesitation, both lads made that brave attempt. If they succeeded in getting away they were going into the unknown. Wandering about an unknown country, risking death in a hundred forms; and yet the very thought of freedom inspired them to make the attempt.

They might have succeeded had they been less tired, but the effect of the drug, the fact that they had been sitting in the cabin for hour upon hour, and the fact that it was nearly forty hours since they had had a decent sleep, all these things combined to make their muscles pull and their limbs sluggish.

For a moment it seemed that they would succeed! They dashed to a point between two flares, and as far as they could see there was no one ahead of them. In twenty seconds they were outside the landing-field! Which way should they turn—right or left?

"Turn left," snapped Jim, "that's the way we came."

Both of them reeled towards the left, and for a hundred yards they raced on, but already they were breathing very hard and Jim Spenser's legs felt like heavy weights. By now, moreover,

they could hear the ominous thudding of running footsteps behind them.

Jim's breath was coming in short, sharp gasps. There was a pain in his chest like nothing he had ever experienced before. His eyes were half-closed and tears were streaming from them; caused by his exertions. Every step demanded a tremendous effort, and he knew he could not go on much longer. Twice he stumbled and almost fell. It was impossible; for the first time he realised the immensity of the task which he had set himself, and he knew that Peter Mason could be in no better shape.

Now his head was throbbing and red spots kept darting in front of his eyes, while his breath grew shorter and the stabbing pain through his chest much worse.

Could he keep going? Was it possible that he would break away from Ben Mardi? How far would he have to go before he was clear of the air-field, before there was a reasonable chance of him escaping from the Berranese and taking a chance of getting through the hilly country into Afghanistan? Strange thoughts flashed through his mind; he remembered the first shooting, the visit of Mr. Mason, the first trip he had had in the air, a dozen other things which could not have taken more than a few seconds to enter his mind, and then drop out again to be replaced by something else.

At his side Peter Mason was almost sobbing

with pain and exhaustion and he ran on mechanically, but every step was torture. Would it never end? Surely anything was better than this, even submitting to Ben Mardi, even being questioned and tortured by those other rulers in Berran of whom Ben Mardi had spoken.

Anything was better——

The two courageous lads staggered on, with the footsteps pounding nearer behind them; and then very suddenly the near silence of the night was broken by the sharp *crack!* of a rifle shot. A bullet hummed perilously near Jim Spenser's head. A second one followed; suddenly the crackle of rifle fire broke out, a fast fusillade.

And now the question that remained was—should they go on, should they still take a chance? Or should they submit to the pursuers? It was a dreadful decision to have to make, and both of them realised that they could not delay it for more than a few seconds. But still they ran on, still they forced their flagging legs to carry them, while the crackling of the rifles behind them grew now into an incessant fire!

CHAPTER XV

BEN MARDI ACTS

THAT mocking, cruel smile which the two lads knew so well was on Ben Mardi's face as he saw them dash into the darkness. He had half-expected it; he had guessed that their courage was of a very high order, particularly Jim Spenser's. But as he snapped his orders there was little or no softness in his heart or in his voice.

Neither lad had seen the dozen armed men who were near the aeroplane, hiding in the shadows. As they darted off, Ben Mardi shouted at his men in Berranese, and the lads had less than a minute's start. Mardi was behind his men, but he wanted to see the fugitives as soon as they were caught.

Not for a moment did it occur to him as possible that they would get away. The very fact that they had risked the death that was lurking in the wild, mountainous district, however, made him wish to recapture them, for their own sakes as well as his own.

His own——

In the flight from England, Ben Mardi had watched the lads and had judged them

accurately. But never had he dreamed that the time would come when he actually owed his life to them. Yet that was true.

Yogg had died trying to save him; Spenser had seen the man fall to a terrible death, and yet had dared to follow him on to the wing. It was a courage which Mardi knew was rarely found, and he had spoken the truth when he had assured the lads that they need no longer fear torture at his hands.

But, as he had said, there were others.

Ben Mardi knew his country, and was prepared to do anything to help it. He knew, moreover, that if Mark Gresham was allowed to use the information and the documents in his possession, the nation of Berran would be split into fragments, and would certainly come under British rule.

Mardi did not want that.

There was wealth in the country, and he had his share of it. If England took control, much of the business would suffer—and Mardi knew, in his heart, that the business was vile, and would never be countenanced under British rule.

Yet Jim Spenser's act had touched him, and he was already planning a different method of attack on Gresham and his friends. But if the lads escaped from the airport, no one in the world could save them or help them.

These thoughts flashed through Mardi's mind as he hurried in the wake of the native soldiers

he had sent after Peter Mason and Jim Spenser. He heard the rattle of the firing, and his sardonic smile tightened.

Two natives, rushing after the others, passed him and he snapped an order:

"Fire to wound, not to kill."

"It shall be done, Ben Mardi." The soldiers answered without stopping, and soon they were within sight of the fast-tiring fugitives. But Peter and Jim Spenser, inspired by fear now as much as that overwhelming urge to escape, seemed to have found a new strength. They were doubling this way and that, and the darkness of the night made it almost impossible for the gunmen to be sure of their targets.

The airfield was a couple of hundred yards behind them now, and the yellow glare from the flares no longer illuminated the land. But the going was getting rougher; twice Jim kicked against a boulder, and almost fell. They hated the darkness, and yet they realised that without it they would have been wounded long ago. It helped them and yet, because they could not be sure where they were running, it hampered them.

It was Jim who made the discovery that they were running uphill, and he groaned aloud.

"Don't know—how steep—it will—get!" he gasped. "Can't—do—much—more!"

"Nor—me!" gasped Peter Mason. "I——"

And then he stopped, for he crashed into a heavy boulder which this time was more than

knee high. He could not stop himself, and he thudded down through the darkness. He tried to get his shoulder to the ground, in order to take the force of the impact, but he failed. He fell sideways, and his temple cracked against a piece of jagged rock. With a single groan, he collapsed, and consciousness left him.

For a moment Jim Spenser didn't know what had happened.

He knew his friend was no longer running a yard away from him, and he heard something that sounded like a fall, but he could not be sure. Nonetheless he stopped, and his heart was bitter. For the past few minutes the sound of rifle fire had been less frequent, and hope had returned; there had been a chance.

But he couldn't leave Peter.

He turned round, breathing hard and feeling, now that he was no longer forcing himself to run, as though his legs would give way beneath him. He heard no sound from Peter; and he was suddenly, dreadfully afraid that one of the flying bullets had hit his friend.

Supposing Peter was—dead?

The thought frightened him more than anything else could have done. He was prepared to face any danger, but if Peter was dead—or even badly hurt—he felt that it would be something for which he could never forgive himself. Perhaps it was madness to think like that, but there it was.

He went forward, step by step, half-expecting any moment to bang into one of Mardi's men. But when he did stub his foot against something on the ground, it was Peter's outstretched body. Peter *was* hit!

Jim's mind seemed to go cold as he dropped down beside his friend. Through the darkness Peter's face was just a pale blurr, but there was enough light for him to see the ugly dark patch on the other's forehead. His lips tightened as he tried to see it more clearly——

And then he heard Ben Mardi's voice!

He would not have been surprised by a sharp call in Berranese, but the thought that Ben Mardi was nearby surprised him into motionlessness. He could see nothing; but Mardi was speaking!

"So you have failed again, Spenser? Did I not place you on parole?"

Perhaps no other words would have jerked Jim together so quickly. He straightened up, and now he saw vague figures closing all about him; he was surrounded; the effort had failed.

Failed! They were caught again, and in all likelihood they would suffer for the attempt to escape. His face was very pale, and tears were very close to his eyes, but somehow he contrived to keep his voice steady.

"I was on parole only while we were in the air, Ben Mardi."

Mardi's low-pitched, mocking laugh, came quickly.

"That is what you call splitting hairs, is it not? But I will admit you are right. What is the matter with Mason?"

"I think—I'm afraid he's hit."

"That was only to be expected," snapped Ben Mardi. "I warned you when we were flying that if you made any attempt to escape it would be dangerous. However—*Grannu!*"

So Grannu was still here! Jim waited, while the natives crowded round him now, and he could see their dusky faces, and the rifles which they carried. Grannu called out:

"Yes, Highness."

"Take the boy Mason to my palace. Spenser, come here."

For the first time Jim Spenser could see Mardi, and he knew that it would be madness for him not to obey. He walked forward, and in the dim glow now cast by the flares, he could see the man's sharp teeth as he smiled.

"That was well done," Ben Mardi said, under his breath. "I salute you, Spenser. But I warn you again that you must be more careful."

Jim hardly knew what to say; certainly those words were the last that he had expected to hear from Ben Mardi's lips. He drew a deep breath, and said slowly:

"If I can escape, naturally I will do so."

"Unless you are on parole, eh?"

"Of course."

"I see. We will discuss the matter later, Spenser. Meanwhile I am sure you are weary. We will go to my palace—or as you would call it, my home, and eat. Then we must rest."

Jim's eyes flashed.

"And what about Peter?"

"He will be looked after."

"But—" Jim felt that he would scream unless he learned quickly what had happened to his friend, "he might be dead. I *must* see him!"

"You will see him in due course," said Ben Mardi smoothly. "And if he is dead, then nothing you or I can do will help him on this earth. But be more cheerful, Spenser. You have physical courage; prove that you have mental and spiritual courage also."

The words helped Jim Spenser more, perhaps, than he realised. They showed him that it would be madness for him to lose his self-control, and reminded him that Mardi would, in all probability, do everything he could to help Peter. He did not speak, but walked along with Ben Mardi. Behind them three native soldiers came silently, although now and again their rifles knocked against the ground, or they kicked against a stone.

The airfield was on their right; Peter was being carried towards it, Jim believed. He walked straight on, with Mardi, not knowing where he was going. Now that he had failed

in that desperate effort to escape, he felt dreadfully tired, and he almost fell asleep while he was moving.

Things happened quickly, and he knew very little about them.

They reached a building, although what it was he did not know. Ben Mardi took his arm, and guided up a flight of wide steps. The first thing that he did realise was that he was no longer surrounded by that eternal darkness; the place was lighted—and he saw electric light blazing from a chandelier in a large hall.

The thing surprised him more than anything else; he had not dreamed for a moment that he would find electricity here. But the effect of the discovery soon wore off, and as he walked up countless flights of stairs—as it seemed to him—and along large, narrow passages, he felt with every step that his knees would give way and that he would collapse. But for Mardi's support he would probably have done so.

But at last they reached their objective.

Jim Spenser found himself in a long, high room, very plainly furnished. There was a bed or a divan against one wall, and a small, modern dressing table by a heavily-curtained window. Two or three chairs, a rich Indian carpet, and a small table, made up the rest of the furniture in the room.

Mardi clapped his hands; two gigantic men entered the room, kow-towing and never once

turning their backs to their leader. In Berranese, Mardi snapped an order, and before Jim realised what was happening, the two servants had advanced, and started to pull his coat off.

It said a great deal for his weariness that he made no protest. He let the men undress him, allowed them to sponge his face and hands, was slipped into a pair of pyjamas that might have been found at any London hotel, and lifted into the bed.

He was drowsy, and nothing seemed to matter. Almost as soon as his eyes closed he was asleep; and Ben Mardi signalled to the servants, who went out noiselessly. Mardi followed; and there was silence in that long, high room, while outside an armed man waited on guard, to make sure that Jim Spenser did not wake up and make yet another desperate attempt to escape.

Mardi did not think the other would be long before he tried again, and he was particularly anxious that Jim Spenser should stay as his "guest." That same, mocking smile had been on the man's lips as he had closed the door, and then walked along to his own quarters.

. . . . .

About half-past three, on the day of that strange flight from England to Berran, the telephone bell in Mark Gresham's flat rang harshly. Gresham and Bob Denver were waiting, and Gresham reached the telephone in the

twinkling of an eye. Denver heard him snap the words:

"Hallo, there!"

A moment later Mark's eyes gleamed. He spoke several times into the telephone, then he banged the receiver down, and swung round to Bob Denver.

"They've been seen! Landed at Crete for refuelling!"

"*Crete?*" Bob Denver's comical face looked even funnier than usual. "Hang it all, they can't have reached there yet!"

"Can't they, then? Ginger Wilson telephoned through to the Central office from Crete, and Ginger wouldn't make a mistake."

"That's true enough," admitted Denver. "But they must have a miracle, not a machine!"

"I told you their bus could average three hundred miles an hour," said Mark Gresham with a touch of irritation. "Let's get going. Unless, of course, you'd prefer to back out."

"Don't talk nonsense! I may be a cripple, but I'm in this game, my son."

Mark grinned as he opened the door of the flat. In a few minutes, driven by Parrett in the Talbot, they were moving through London towards Heston Airport.

They might have waited at Heston for the news, but there had been several important conferences to attend, for as Mr. Mason knew the matter was of vital importance. Mark

Gresham had arranged a definite plan of action, and it had been approved.

Already half a dozen of his friends were ready to start towards Berran, by air, as soon as the word was given. But the 'plane which Mark Gresham proposed to use for the flight was a small one, capable of an average speed of two hundred and seventy miles an hour. The other six men would follow, also by air, but in slower machines; Gresham wanted to reach Berran first, spy out the land and then, when the others arrived, have his plans ready.

Heston was reached in little more than half an hour, although Parrett had to break most of the rules of the road to manage it. The Talbot swung into the airport, towards the hangar where the 'plane was waiting, with its engine running. Less than ten minutes after their arrival, Mark Gresham and Bob Denver left the airport; and their 'plane, the *Eagle*, soared towards the skies, watched by a hundred pairs of curious eyes, and yet by no one who knew where the airmen were going, or dreamed of it.

But Mark Gresham and Bob Denver knew—and they were prepared to fight to the bitter end to save Peter Mason and Jim Spenser from death or torture.

The question was—would they get there in time?

CHAPTER XVI

A SURPRISE DEVELOPMENT

WHEN Jim Spenser awakened the next morning he did not know immediately just where he was. A warm sun was shining through a tall window on his left, and the light curtains at the window—the heavy ones of the previous night had been drawn—were blowing gently in the wind. There was a very low, whirring sound that he did not at once recognise, from an electric fan. As far as he could see the room was empty, and as he glanced about him he was wondering what on earth had happened. Certainly this was very different from the Maybells' cottage! Then suddenly his mind clicked and he realised what had happened.

Ben Mardi's Palace!

Now he remembered how the two gigantic servants had undressed him and put him to bed, he remembered the desperate chance which they had taken in a bid for escape, and how ignobly it had failed. He remembered the talk with Ben Mardi, even though he had been almost asleep as he had walked, and more than anything else he remembered the vague white blur of Peter's face, and the ugly dark patch on his friend's temple.

How was Peter?

All the fears which he had felt on the previous night flooded back. He pushed the bedclothes off and started to climb out of bed, but he had not moved more than a foot before he stopped, his face twisted in a grimace of pain.

His legs felt as though they would never move again. Never in his life had he experienced such pain as shot through them, and now he was feeling it in his shoulders, his back, his arms. What on earth had happened?

It was not for a few seconds that he realised the cause of the trouble; then he forced a smile as he laid back on his pillows. The escape of the previous day, coupled with the absolute fatigue which had overwhelmed him in the evening, had stiffened his muscles so much that this was the result.

It may have been a strange fact that he could lie there in the circumstances, and see anything funny in them, but he could not prevent himself from chuckling. During the flight he had been threatened with torture and worse; he had had pictures in his mind of being brought to Berran and stuck into some small underground dungeon. Instead of that he was in a comfortable bed, in a bigger room than he had ever slept in in his life, more comfortable also than he had ever been either at school or with Peter Mason. It was the last thing he had expected, and he wondered how long it would continue.

That thought wiped the smile from his face.

This was only the beginning; Ben Mardi might be very friendly now, because of the affair in the *Warrior*, but their plight was still dangerous. For all Jim knew, Ben Mardi and the other rulers of Berran had already been in conference.

Jim Spenser, however, was more a lad of action than anything else. Thinking was all right in its place, but certainly he had not the slightest desire to lie here and puzzle the affair out. On top of this there was his increasing anxiety about Peter. How on earth could he get a message to his friend, how could he summon help? He would have given a great deal just then for the sight of Ben Mardi's face, or even one of the gigantic servants who had dealt with him so summarily on the previous night.

He yawned and stretched his arms above his head, grimacing again as the pain shot through them. But the pain was worth while with that action, for his right hand banged against something fixed to the wall just behind him, and turning his head he saw that there was a bell-push near an electric light switch.

Jim chuckled again. This was getting more like an hotel than ever. He pressed the bell-push, wondering whether anything would happen, but he did not have to wonder for long. The bell had hardly ceased ringing when the door opened, and he saw for a second time one of the giants he had noticed vaguely twelve hours before. He

was even bigger in daylight than he had seemed before; naked but for a loin cloth and a pair of sandals, his vast muscles swelled up beneath his shiny brown skin. He was one of the ugliest men that Jim Spenser had ever seen, but his white teeth were bared in a smile, and he looked friendly. In fact, Jim Spenser told himself, he was the friendliest soul he had seen for a year.

A year!

How absurd it was to think like that; only twenty-four hours ago or a little longer, he had actually been in England with friends all about him. It seemed incredible, but it was true. Yet it seemed to him that he had been away from England for weeks, if not longer, as though he was now living in another world.

He forced the thoughts out of his mind, however, and addressed the smiling servant, who was now standing by the bed, bowing low just as he had done to Mardi on the previous evening.

And then another absurd thought occurred to Jim Spenser; he did not know what to say!

The very foolishness of it made him laugh, and the servant's beaming smile widened, if that were possible. Jim was helpless for a few moments, but he sobered at once, and as he did so he looked on the chair at the side of his bed, expecting to see his clothes there.

They were missing!

That thought worried him perhaps more than it should have done. It flashed through his mind

that Ben Mardi must have realised he stood very little chance of getting anywhere without his clothes, and therefore they had been taken away. But the fact that they were no longer by his bed gave him an opening.

"I would like to get up," he said. "Will you bring my clothes, please?"

As he finished speaking it occurred to him that the man probably understood nothing of English, and that the words might never have been spoken for all the intelligence they carried. He did not remain long in doubt, however, for the giant bowed again and said in deep, broken English:

"His Highness tell me call him when you awake. Me go."

With his flashing smile, the servant bowed as he finished speaking, and stepped backwards towards the door. He went so quickly that Jim Spenser had no opportunity for asking any further questions, and the lad lay back on his pillows, more puzzled than ever. The one consoling thought, however, was that he would get some kind of information from Ben Mardi, particularly about Peter.

He smiled again at the thought that he should find any consolation in the fact that Ben Mardi was coming to see him, but before anything else passed through his mind the door opened again.

For some reason which he could hardly understand he felt afraid as he saw it swing slowly

towards him and he sat up in bed staring towards the door, his eyes wide open.

But he had nothing to worry about yet, at all events. For another servant, a much smaller man this time, dressed from neck to feet in a long flowing white robe, entered the room bearing a tray in his hands. On the tray was a plate of biscuits and a pot of tea—together with sugar, milk and lemon—obviously in case he preferred his tea Russian fashion.

This was getting a greater joke than ever. What on earth possessed Ben Mardi to treat him as a guest like this instead of a prisoner? The whole thing was incredible, but the only thing that Jim could do was to make the best of it and hope that these hospitable gestures did not end too quickly. Apparently this man did not speak English, for Jim thanked him, and received only a tight-lipped smile in return. As silently as he had entered, the man in the white robe left the room, but unlike the giant he turned his back and certainly behaved more in the way of a jailer than a friend.

Jim drank his tea and munched his biscuits—made, he saw with a smile, by a big London firm—and wondered how long Ben Mardi would be. Actually the lad was at his second cup of tea and his fourth biscuit—not only until then did he realise how hungry he was—when the door opened again, and this time the big man entered, stood by the door, and bowed low.

Ben Mardi followed a moment later.

Jim had had some surprises in the last few days, but for some reason or other this affected him more than anything else. Up till now he had only seen Ben Mardi in European clothes, and apart from his slightly darker skin the Berranese High Priest might have been an Englishman. But now he was dressed in the fashion of the East, and Jim gasped. The man made an impressive picture.

He was wearing a jacket or coat which went as far as his knees, and it was made of some shining material which glistened gold and silver as the sun shone on it through the window. The front of the coat was studded with precious stones which glittered as though with a thousand fires, and the neck-band was simply a mass of emeralds. Ben Mardi's head was covered with a large turban, flaming red, with a single diamond stuck in the centre. His legs from the knees downwards, were clad in puttees—that was the only word Jim could think of—of red and white, and his pointed slippers with a curled tip at each end, were also studded with gems.

He looked a different being entirely!

But there was no mistaking those dark eyes, that handsome face, and the thin lips which had the same mocking smile Jim had seen so often on the previous day.

Apparently Ben Mardi did not mind his

servant hearing what was said, for he advanced towards Jim, smiling, and then speaking.

"You are refreshed, Spenser?"

"I feel heaps better," admitted Jim, "but I'm aches and pains all over."

"That is the reward," said Ben Mardi, with his mocking smile, "of doing things that you should not have attempted. Had you not made that attempt to escape last night you would probably be feeling much better."

"It was worth it," said Jim with a grin, and then his face grew serious. "But tell me—have you any news of my friend?"

"You will be glad to hear," said Ben Mardi, "that your friend is conscious. Apart from a nasty cut on the temple, he is very much in the same condition as you. He has already enquired after you, for he awakened over an hour ago."

"Can I see him?" asked Jim, eagerly.

"All in good time," said Ben Mardi. "I came to see you, Spenser, with a definite reason."

Jim did not know why, but he felt that the other was much more serious than he had been before. He nodded, and waited for the next words.

They came very slowly, and it was easy to see that Ben Mardi felt that the subject was one of vital importance.

"I want you to promise me, Spenser, that you will not make another of those foolish attempts to escape. In short, I want your parole again.

No—don't interrupt until I have finished. Not only do I want to be as sure as I can that you will not run your head into unnecessary bother, but I shall find myself in a very difficult position if I am unable to show you unharmed to the other rulers of my country. For your own sake, Spenser, as well as for mine, I want you to give me your parole."

Jim hesitated for a moment and then he said, very slowly.

"For how long, Ben Mardi?"

There was a gleam in the Berranese man's eyes at the question. It was so typical of the lad.

"Shall we say until to-morrow morning? If I feel it necessary I can renew it then."

Jim smiled to himself. In his present condition it would be quite impossible for him to make any attempt to escape for twenty-four hours, for he doubted whether he would be able to walk the length of this room unaided. He nodded and said:

"I'll make no attempt to escape, Ben Mardi, until to-morrow morning at this time."

Ben Mardi nodded.

"That is good. I did not wish to force you into giving it, for I know just how obstinate you are. Like so many Englishmen, opposition merely serves to make you more pugnacious. However, that does not concern us at the moment, but I would like to say that had you

not given me your parole I should have found it necessary to put a very strong guard over you and I doubt whether it would have been possible for me to interview you as I am doing at the moment."

"I assure you that I'm grateful," Jim said quickly.

Ben Mardi laughed.

"I really believe you are," he said. "Now you will want a bath, and then breakfast. If your friend is well enough you shall breakfast together downstairs. If not, I will arrange for the meal to be served in his room. I regret," he added, with a mocking smile, "that I shall be unable to attend myself, but I am inclined to believe that you will not find that a hardship."

Before Jim could speak again, Ben Mardi clapped his hands, and the gigantic servant hurried towards the bed. Mardi gave some orders in Berranese and then added in English:

"This man, Spenser, will act as your servant and your bodyguard. You have my orders, and you can be assured that he will carry them out, not to move anywhere outside the grounds of the Palace, but you may go just where you like inside them. Bakku—that is his name—understands English, and you will have everything that you need."

Jim Spenser smiled.

"It's very different from what I expected it to be," he admitted.

"That is good," said Ben Mardi. "I will admit that but for your adventure on the wing of the *Warrior* you would have been welcomed in rather different style. I——" And then Ben Mardi stopped while Jim Spenser's smile disappeared, and despite the pain in his legs and back he scrambled out of bed and hurried to the window.

Ben Mardi reached it a fraction of a second before him. Both of them heard the droning of the aeroplane which had come near the Palace. Now when they looked out of the window they saw it flying only a couple of thousand feet above them; and Jim Spenser immediately jumped to the conclusion which Ben Mardi voiced a moment later.

"It would appear," he said, "that your friends have already located you. It is to be hoped, Spenser, that you will stick to your parole and that Gresham—if he is there—does not make any foolish attempt to get you out. I warn you—I shall not be responsible for the consequences should anything like that happen."

Without another word Ben Mardi turned and walked out of the room. The door closed and Jim Spenser found himself standing by the window, staring up at the fast disappearing aeroplane and wondering what Ben Mardi meant by those last words. That the meaning was a grim one, Jim knew; he had given his promise not to attempt to escape and he would

keep it. But what would happen if Mark Gresham and Bob Denver presented them with an opportunity for escape?

In his heart, however, Jim Spenser admitted that it was not that possibility that worried him. The thing was—he did not believe that Ben Mardi would be as lenient to Mark Gresham or Bob Denver as he had been to him. For the moment danger did not surround the two lads, but was very grave so far as the others were concerned. It was a queer fact that Jim did not doubt for a moment who was in that aeroplace; Mark Gresham was up there, and very soon an attempt would be made. What would be the result?

CHAPTER XVII

THE HIGH COUNCIL

JIM SPENSER waited at the window until the aeroplane was out of sight, and then he turned round slowly. The door was closed and Bakku was walking towards him, and the man's smile was so vast that Jim could not prevent himself from responding to it.

"You are stiff, yes?" Bakku's deep voice rumbled.

"I'm so stiff," admitted Jim, "that I can hardly move."

"That shall be put good, yes?" Bakku grinned and opened the door for the lad to go out into the passage. There was no one in sight, for the sentry had been taken away now that Jim had given his parole, and the English lad and the gigantic Bakku walked twenty yards along until they reached a second door.

Before they reached it Jim Spenser had time to see something of the wonderful building in which he was a virtual prisoner. The ceiling was tremendously high and ornamented with mural paintings of surprising beauty. Jim did not know much about that kind of painting, but he did know that the artist had worked

while the plaster on the walls was wet, and that the colours were absorbed so that the paintings became actually part of the walls themselves. High windows through which the sun streamed, were built in the wall at frequent intervals, and through them Jim glimpsed the country outside, and he saw pleasant mountains, crag-strewn hillsides, and here and there a stretch of green trees. He was too high to see the actual grounds of Ben Mardi's Palace, but for the moment that did not have to worry him. He was concerned about the aeroplane and Ben Mardi's grim words of warning, but it was not long before that and everything else was swept completely out of him mind. The bath-room into which he walked was wonderful, with marble floor strewn liberally with mats. The bath itself was built in the floor and was almost as large as a small swimming-bath.

A few feet away from it was a low trestle table, across which a mattress was placed and Jim wondered what it was for. He did not feel embarrassed at stripping and jumping into the bath, for very often at school he had bathed in the company of other fellows in the open-air bath, and he felt very much at home with the gigantic Bakku.

Bakku stood by, while Jim had a quick bathe, handicapped, of course, by the fact that his arms and legs were so stiff. A quick rub-down with a vast bath-towel brought a glow to his

flesh which made him feel a different lad. Then he stretched out for his pyjama jacket, but in the words of the Americans, he hadn't seen anything yet. Bakku shook his head and pointed to the table which was like a high couch.

"You stiff, mister? Bakku soon put that right. Lie down, please."

Jim had often been massaged after hectic football matches, but he had never been worked on by such a tremendous fellow as Bakku. At least he knew that the other meant him no harm and he surrendered himself. He laid down on the couch and then Bakku started to pound his shoulders and legs.

For the first few minutes Jim thought he could not stand it; the pain was a hundred times worse than when he had first tried to walk that morning. But after a few minutes it eased, and once again he felt that warm glow. Bakku pummelled and massaged and pinched him mercilessly, but in less than a quarter of an hour Jim was on his feet again, and to his surprise he could do practically what he liked without feeling a twinge of pain.

Bakku's grin was enormous.

"You feel better, mister?"

"You worked a miracle!" said Jim Spenser.

"No miracle, mister. It was easy, yes? If you do it right. Now we will dress, yes?"

Feeling a different man Jim Spenser walked

back to his bedroom. They entered quickly but Jim stood on the threshold, his eyes widening in surprise.

The bed had been made during his absence, but it was not that which made him pause. It was the array of clothes laid out on the bed which surprised him.

He had expected to see his own clothes, but in their place were garments not dissimilar to those which Ben Mardi had worn. The jacket was shining brightly, the buttons were of pearl, and there was even a white turban, together with a pair of those curved, pointed shoes.

Jim drew a deep breath.

"I can't wear those!" he exclaimed.

Bakku nodded, without ceasing to smile.

"His Highness, he say so. Bakku do everything his Highness say, yes?"

For a moment Jim was tempted to protest more vehemently, but it was not long before he worked himself into a more reasonable frame of mind. Obviously he was expected to wear these barbaric things, and since they made little or no difference to him it would be madness to raise any protest. In many ways he was very lucky, but he realised it would not do him any good if he raised objections about small things.

With Bakku's help he dressed in those colourful Eastern clothes, and if he felt more than a little foolish as he looked at himself in front of a

long mirror, Bakku's smile expressed the giant's approval.

"Very fine, mister. Ben Mardi, he will be pleased, no?"

"I daresay he will," said Jim with a grimace, "but I wouldn't like to hear the lads at school laughing, if they saw me. However, I'm getting hungry!"

"The food, it is all ready," Bakku assured him. "You will come with me, please."

As there was nothing else to do, Jim followed the big man, passing the bathroom again, and then commencing to descend three long, wide flights of stairs. He hated to think what he would have felt like had he been forced to climb down these with the stiffened muscles which he had when he first awakened. But supposing he was right in assuming that Peter Mason had a room on the same floor as he had himself, and that Peter had been well enough to go downstairs to breakfast, he wondered what his friend would say when he saw him togged up like this.

It was not long before he found out.

The floor at the end of the third staircase was built on a much grander scale than the other floors. The passages were twice as wide, and filled with Eastern ornaments and *objets d'arts*. There were no doors, but great porticos, all corded and draped with heavy curtains. Some of the curtains were pulled aside, others hung

there as effectively as a door. Bakku went through, his shiny body gleaming as the sun shone through window after window. After what seemed an age they reached a portico at which Bakku stopped and bowed low.

"You first, master."

Jim smiled, and walked through. He was sure in his own mind that he would find Peter about, and he was already preparing himself for a cutting comment if the other laughed at the way he was dressed.

And then he saw Peter, and he could not prevent himself from grinning.

For Peter was dressed exactly as he was himself! His own relief at finding this equalled Peter's relief at finding that Jim was also decked out as a rajah or some equally large man, and the only thing which they had both refused to do was to wear the turban, and Peter had had an ample excuse. His head was bound, and his right eye was bruised. They started towards each other and met in the middle of the tremendous, high room. As they shook hands Jim said:

"Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm feeling fine!" exclaimed Peter. "My head ached a bit this morning, but a great big fellow—something like the man behind you—pummelled me about until I wanted to scream, but I felt a hundred times better afterwards."

"But so did I," said Jim. "It was almost being worth captured for this."

Peter nodded. Obviously he was feeling on top of the world.

In the middle of the room a small table was set with dishes and coffee, and a white-robed man—a more genial-looking fellow than the one who had brought Jim's tea—lifted the covers set for two, and Jim discovered that they were going to sit down to a good, old-fashioned breakfast of eggs and bacon. The fact that they were thousands of miles away from England, had never seemed so strange as it did now. But for the oriental furnishings, and the strange servants, they might have been at any big hotel in England, but they were so hungry that they did not allow that fact to worry them. They set to with a will, and as they breakfasted they chatted over the events of the previous day.

Not until they had finished breakfast did Jim grow serious. Then he told Peter just what had happened that morning, when the aeroplane had flown over the Palace. Peter realised the danger to Mark Gresham and Bob Denver —if indeed those two men were here—and both lads were worried. But for the moment there was nothing they could do.

. . . . .

Breakfast had been finished for half-an-hour before the two lads stopped talking, and stood up from the table. The white-robed man took

their chairs away as they stood up, and Bakku came towards them, bowing low.

"You like walk, yes?"

"We'd like one very much," admitted Jim Spenser, "although a little while ago I didn't think I'd ever want to walk again. How large are the grounds of the Palace, Bakku?"

The giant stretched his great arms as high as he could and then made a vast circle in the air; obviously the grounds were extensive. He walked a few yards ahead of the youngsters, and as he left them, Peter said slowly:

"I suppose after last night we'd better not try to get away again?"

"We can't," Jim explained, and went on to recount his talk with Ben Mardi. Peter acknowledged that it would be impossible, for twenty-four hours at least, to make any attempt to get away. It was a strange business altogether—and perhaps the most surprising part about it was the fact that each lad took so much for granted.

Apart from the fact that they *knew* they were prisoners, they might have been here on holiday —and no more glorious place could have been imagined. They had read of the splendours of the East, but never in their lives had they dreamed of anything as beautiful as the grounds of the palace in which they were walking.

Palms, waving gently in the wind, conifers and other trees whose names they did not know, abounded. They walked through a grove of

orange trees, and about a shrubbery where riotous flowers grew in thousands. The land was rocky, for the most part, but here and there it was very smooth.

In one part of the grounds a stream ran, burbling merrily, dropping now and again down a small, cascading waterfall, reflecting the blue of the skies or the gold of the sun. A great rockery was built along its banks, and the colours of the flowers seemed more varied there than ever.

But—there was a high wall, built right round the walls of the palace; there was beauty inside, but what would they find if ever they managed to get away?

The mountains in the distance were mighty and yet somehow threatening. A blue mist gathered at their peaks, visible even from where the lads were walking. They saw the occasional patches of forest on the lower slopes, and they wondered whether it would be possible for any human being who did not know the country to live outside these walls for long. The more they thought about it, the less they liked the prospect.

Jim shrugged his shoulders as they turned away from the distant mountains, and walked back along the banks of the stream, with Bakku in close attendance.

"We'd be stuck," he said. "It would be madness to try. So perhaps it's just as well

we're on parole. The only thing is—will Mark and Bob know much about it?"

"I don't think they'd do anything foolish," Peter said, "and I hope not. Look at those fellows over there; they'd prove a tough handful for anybody."

"Those fellows" were a dozen men, standing in a group about a hundred yards away. Dressed in the now familiar turban, knee-length jacket and puttees, the men were grim-looking fellows, all armed with rifles, and with ugly-looking knives stuck in their belts. Peter shivered as he saw them, and Jim's heart dropped.

Then, without warning, a bower of leaves ahead of them seemed to open, and to their surprise they saw Ben Mardi. He smiled as he saw them, but his face was very grim. Something like a panic filled Peter Mason's mind, and Jim wasn't in much better straits. They walked towards the High Priest; and his words seemed to confirm their worst fears.

"You have been summoned to attend a meeting of the High Council of Berran," he said very grimly. "I have come to tell you in person, for you must be careful—very careful indeed."

And his words, spoken slowly as they were, seemed to strike with the cold hand of dread into the hearts of the two lads.

The High Council—the highest power

in Berran. What would happen at the meeting?

Neither lad knew, and yet they were afraid.

. . . . .

Both Peter Mason and Jim Spenser felt bewildered, some twenty minutes later, and their eyes hurt as they left the brilliant sunshine of the world outside for the vast building to which they had been led by Ben Mardi and a dozen of his soldiers.

They had been carried in a double-litter, by giants like Bakku, although their own servant—if he could be called that—was not with them. The easy running of the men had been amazing, but the narrow, crowded streets of the town or city had bewildered them even more.

They could see through the bead curtains of their litters as they were carried through the streets. On either side were small buildings, little better than mud huts, outside which men and women stood or sat, staring all the time at the glittering procession which passed. Hundreds of mongrel dogs roamed the streets, with as many stark naked children; and human beings and animals alike seemed to be curious about the three litters—Mardi's in the lead, those of the lads following.

Now and again they passed a snake-charmer, and they would have given a great deal to be able to stay and watch the men. They squatted

cross-kneed, playing their thin pipes with the high-pitched, whining note; and as they played the great snakes swayed to the weird rhythm. But no sooner did the lads sight a man than the litter flashed by.

Then the streets had become wider and cleaner; what people they saw were well-dressed, and most of them carried rifles. Soon they reached a high wall, along which guards paced, their rifles on their shoulders, and bayonets fixed.

Both lads thought fleetingly of Buckingham Palace, and the guards there; these men seemed similar, although of course their dress was entirely different. But they marched up and down, looking neither to the right nor the left.

The panic which had filled the youngsters earlier in the day increased, but neither of them revealed it.

Suddenly they had reached a wide gateway; the carriers had taken them up the steps, along a wide drive flanked with waving trees; and then the litters had been put down outside a vast white building, as large if not larger than the Houses of Parliament in London.

London! To think they had been within fifty or sixty miles of the great Metropolis less than two days ago! It didn't seem possible; and this place, with its great domed roof, its vast windows, its grim-faced guards, seemed very real.

Ben Mardi was waiting on the steps. They climbed out of the litters and approached him; and a moment later they entered the building, narrowing their eyes as the gloom surrounded them.

Guards were still here, big, ferocious-looking men, most of them bearded, all wearing long, fierce moustaches. No one spoke. Their feet echoed on the marble floors and along the great corridors. With Mardi still leading, they reached a portico—it was the only word Peter could think of to explain the doorways—and then Mardi stopped.

Two guards appeared, bowed before the High Priest, and stood aside. Mardi motioned the lads forward, and they stepped into the room beyond, their hearts beating fast.

They were in the Council Chamber of the leaders of Berran—and it was impossible for them to say whether they would ever get out again alive and unharmed.

But they went forward sturdily, their faces set, no suggestion of fear in their eyes or on their lips.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE COUNCIL'S DECISION

THE room in which the two lads found themselves was larger than anything they had ever seen before. So wide was it that they could hardly see right across; and its ceiling seemed to stretch to the very heavens themselves. The only light came from above—a great dome, with glass walls, from which the sunlight filtered, as if reluctantly. No windows were built in the massive walls—probably because the Council Chamber was in the centre of the building.

A heavy smell of incense filled the air, but neither Peter Mason nor Jim Spenser thought much about it. They had eyes for only one thing—the dais at one end of the vast chamber.

It was a platform, perhaps twenty-feet wide, and to reach it Ben Mardi—ahead of them now—had to walk four narrow steps. On the dais were a dozen chairs—thrones would be a better word. All but one were occupied; and the bearded men sitting on them were staring, without exception, at the two English lads who were standing so bravely below them.

Silence reigned, and through it the tapping of Ben Mardi's feet as he reached the platform and

walked towards the vacant throne. The silence was more profound after he had sat down, and Jim felt the sweat on the back of his neck and on his forehead.

Would no one ever speak?

Peter Mason shifted his feet, and drew a deep breath. The silence in this vast place was getting on his nerves, and for the first time the wound in his forehead began to throb, painfully, incessantly. For perhaps three minutes, which seemed an age, the silence lasted; and then the man in the middle of the platform, on a throne larger, and more magnificent than any of the others, clapped his hands.

Guards round the walls of the Council Chamber clicked their heels and then turned towards the doors—there was one at either end. For a few minutes the chamber echoed to their marching feet; and then silence fell again, absolute and unnerving.

Peter and Jim were watching the man in the centre of the dais.

He was a huge man—as big, they imagined, as Bakku. Unlike that grinning blackie, he was clad in gorgeous robes which put their own, and those of the other men, into the shade. He was shining from head to feet in jewels, and his raiment was multi-coloured like a cloak of many colours. But it was his face that concerned them most.

They thought immediately of Ben Addi.

Ben Addi was there, next to Mardi; they did not see him. They saw only the black beard of the man who was obviously the leader of the Council. They saw his great hooked nose, his black, shining eyes; and they told themselves they had never seen a man who looked so evil.

And the silence went on, unnerving, frightening. Jim told himself that unless someone spoke soon, he would scream!

Then the relief came.

The bearded man spoke, and his deep voice echoed cavernously round the Chamber.

"These are your prisoners, Mardi?"

He spoke in English—a fact that neither lad realised at the moment; all of the men on the dais, as it happened, could speak English, and his choice was deliberate.

"They are," said Mardi; he rose to his feet as he spoke, and stayed there. It was a queer fact that Peter and Jim looked on him now as a friend—the only friend, unless they counted Bakku—in Berran!

"And they have information?" the man went on.

"To the best of my knowledge," said Ben Mardi, "they have no information. I brought them, Ben Ghool, as hostages, with whom to force the hands of the man Gresham."

"I see. They are relatives of Gresham?"

"They are good friends. I believe that Gresham is already here, in Berran, in search of them."

The bearded man whom Mardi had addressed as Ben Ghool, bared his teeth; it could not be called a smile. They had thought Mardi's smile cruel but it had been nothing compared with this. As he spoke the man's eyes were fixed on them, as though he guessed the effect of his expression, and gloated over it.

"Ye-es. Gresham has been seen. He is foolish, Mardi, foolish indeed. You have done well to bring them here. Gresham has followed; and we will not allow him to slip through our fingers again."

"That is how I reasoned it, Ben Ghool." Mardi's voice was low-pitched, but very clear. "I submit that I have done my duty to Berran."

"That is true, Ben Mardi."

"And," said Ben Mardi, his expression very grim, "I have a request to make of the Council, Ben Ghool."

There was a silence again, and the two lads, although they did not entirely understand what was in Mardi's mind, believed that the request concerned them. They waited on tenterhooks, while for the first time the man named Ben Ghool shifted his gaze from them, and looked towards Ben Mardi.

"It shall be granted," he said, "if it is possible. Name it, Ben Mardi!"

Mardi drew a deep breath, and seemed to be preparing himself for a tremendous effort. Every

eye was turned on him, and yet he spoke coolly enough.

"I am hoping," he said, "that the Council will allow the hostages to remain in my care until Gresham has been captured. That is all, Ben Ghool."

For a moment no one spoke; several of the men on the dais breathed heavily, as though startled. Ben Ghool turned from Ben Mardi, and eyed the two lads. His smile was beastly, and the mockery in his voice a thousand times worse than ever it had been in Ben Mardi's.

"So. You have a liking for them, Ben Mardi?"

"They have rendered me a service, Ben Ghool, against which nothing can compare. They are boys, and they know nothing of the affair on which Gresham is working. For that reason I plead for them."

Jim Spenser's mouth was dry; Peter Mason felt sick. They did not know why, but it seemed to them that unless Ben Mardi had his own way, they would be the prisoners of Ben Ghool—and the very thought made them shudder.

"I see," said Ben Ghool, and his expression was foul. "I have heard of their bravery, Ben Mardi. They should be excellent sport for the Council, should they not?"

Jim gasped; Peter drew a deep breath, and felt that his knees would let him down at any moment. What on earth did the man mean by "excellent sport?" Something, they felt, which

was too terrible for words. The cruelty of the man was obvious, and they told themselves that most of the others on the dais were as bad.

A silence that seemed worse than anything that had preceded it dropped over the Council Chamber. Neither lad knew what to expect next, and even Ben Mardi's steady voice made them jump.

"There is good sport, Ben Ghool, in Berran and the surrounding districts. These lads are English."

As he finished there was a growl, not from Ben Ghool but from most of the others present. Mardi's eyes flashed, but before he spoke one of the others snapped out:

"That makes it better! They shall help Gresham to give us entertainment!"

"Have you forgotten," flashed Mardi, "that if England should offer violence, we should be smashed beyond repair?"

Another growl, more angry this time, filled the Council Chamber, but it was left to Ben Ghool to answer.

"We fear no one, Ben Mardi, not even the English, for whom you have such a great respect." The sneer in his words was obvious even to the two youngsters.

Ben Mardi drew himself up to his full height.

"If that is so, Ben Ghool, why did the Council send me to England, amid the dangers that exist there, on such a mission? We *are* afraid of

England; you know it as well as I! And if these lads come to any harm, you would live to regret it. I am convinced of it."

Ben Ghool laughed unpleasantly.

"You are a fool, Mardi. No one in England will ever know. We shall take their tongues out, so that they cannot speak; and their fingers, that they cannot write! The Council refuses your request!"

There had not been the slightest suggestion, when he had started speaking, that his answer was coming so quickly. He roared the last word, and as he did so he rose to his feet for the first time. His cruel teeth were bared, and he lifted his right hand high towards the ceiling; and as he spoke there came a roar of approval from the others on the dais, with the exception of Ben Mardi.

Mardi was still standing up, very slim and cool; and if the lads had never learned to like him before, they did so then. That he should take such a stand as he was doing, because of the debt which he owed them, proved that at heart Ben Mardi was made of finer metal, that his cruelty was more apparent than real.

But—what would happen now?

It might not have been so bad for the youngsters had they known what the "entertainment" meant; but they had heard enough when Ghool had talked so wickedly about tearing their tongues out, cutting off their fingers.

The very thought made them shiver.

That such cruelties were practised they knew; that some of the Eastern races were barbaric in the extreme they also knew. But this seemed like some fantastic dream, something which could not happen to them in real life.

Yet the members of the Council had approved that bellowed refusal; and the threat of torture, which had receded a while ago, was very real again now—and dangerously close.

But Ben Mardi had not finished.

His eyes matched Ghool's; none of the others spoke or uttered a sound after that roar of approval. Then slowly Ghool sat down, and Mardi took a step forward on the raised platform.

"I submit myself," he said, "to the rules of the Council, Ben Ghool. You are its leader and its spokesman, but I claim, as High Priest and Hereditary Councillor, that the vote should be taken. This is a matter of importance, and it controls the future of our country!"

Ghool laughed as unpleasantly as before.

"What need is there for a vote?" he demanded. "There is none other here who would go with you, Ben Mardi. Already you have risked a great deal. Remember power can be changed—and there are many men in Berran who would like to be High Priest—if only Ben Mardi was not there."

For the first time Mardi showed a hint of anger.

"That is a cheap sneer," he retorted quickly. "And I persist, Ben Ghool, in demanding a vote. And before that vote I demand a hearing."

"We have been very patient with you," snapped Ghool. "I warn you again—be careful!"

"The man who has the right on his side can afford to take risks," answered Ben Mardi disdainfully. "I do not fear for myself, Ben Ghool, but for my country. Listen——"

"I shall not listen!" snapped Ben Ghool, his eyes glittering. "You have spoken enough, Ben Mardi!"

"I shall speak again," said Ben Mardi, through clenched teeth. "It is a rule of the Council that any member shall speak before putting a suggestion to the vote of the Councillors. I shall speak—*and you will listen!*"

For a moment the lads were afraid that Ben Mardi had gone too far, and their own fear was forgotten, now, in a fear for the man who was making such a courageous effort to save them from death and torture.

Ben Ghool was on his feet, his eyes flashing, his right hand at the hilt of a knife in his diamond-studded jacket. He looked mountainous against the slim figure of Ben Mardi; and yet Mardi's eyes did not flinch.

For a moment it seemed stalemate; and then one of the others, a much older man than either Mardi or Ghool, broke the tense silence.

"It is the rule, Ben Ghool, that a Councillor shall speak should he desire."

Ben Ghool flashed a glance of sheer malevolence at the speaker, and Ben Mardi's lips curled a little. But Ghool sat down and his voice was like a bark.

"Proceed, Ben Mardi!"

"Thank you," said Mardi slowly; and as he finished he flashed a smile of encouragement towards the two lads. Both Peter and Jim were icily cold, and they felt sick with excitement. There was something fascinating and yet awful about this argument—which was, they knew, a verbal fight for their lives.

Could Mardi carry the day? Or would Ben Ghool win, would they be the victims of these barbarians' pleasure? They didn't know; and they tried hard not to think of the possibility of failure. For if Mardi failed, they knew their fates were sealed.

Mark Gresham—Bob Denver—any others who might be on the way from England to help them —all these things were forgotten. All that mattered was this battle of words.

"I have warned you," said Ben Mardi very slowly, and addressing the whole of the Council, "that these lads are English and that if word reached their Government that they had been ill-treated and, afterwards, murdered, it would mean war. We are fighting against the man Gresham to prevent war. It will be folly, I tell

you, to do anything else that might bring it about."

He paused; and this time there was no outburst. His words seemed to have a good effect, and the gleaming eyes of the two lads showed that hope had returned again. As slowly as ever, the man who, a few short hours before, they had looked on as their worst enemy, went on with his impassioned speech.

"And there are other things. I was charged to capture Gresham or conceive a way by which he should be lured back to this country. My mission was accomplished. But Gresham will not come alone; there will be others with him, and the situation is already fraught with grave danger. I repeat that to do anything else to cause the enmity of the British Government would be a folly that no one in Berran would ever cease to regret.

"Again—I am the High Priest of Berran." As he uttered the words, Ben Mardi drew himself up, and his eyes seemed on fire. "For countless generations, my fathers before me have held that honour. The life of the High Priest is sacred; had I never returned, there would have been a weeping and a wailing in Berran, and the people would have cried out for vengeance against those who sent me to my death. Is that not true?"

Several of the other Councillors grunted; Ben Ghool's eyes were narrowed, little pools of evil.

"It is true," went on Ben Mardi, "and you know it well. Then remember, Councillors, that but for these lads, I should now be dead. Remember that I do not only advise you for your good, but I demand in the name of our great gods that these lads be left in my charge. I declare them sacred to our shrines! Now, Ben Ghool, how will you reply to that?"

Ben Ghool was on his feet in a moment, his eyes flashing, his arms waving.

"It is madness!" he snarled. "Our gods rule for us, not for the English. For as many generations as your fathers have ruled the Priests, Ben Mardi, my fathers have ruled Berran! And throughout those ages, it has amused our rulers to watch their prisoners squirm, to hear them squeal, to feel the greatness of Berran and its rulers. Would you say that my fathers were wrong, Ben Mardi? Would you condemn the customs of the ages?"

For a moment there was silence; and then Ben Mardi said, in a voice that was still clear but even lower than before:

"Until now, Ben Ghool, I found pleasure in seeing men suffer pain. I shall no longer. Your fathers and mine were wrong to inflict that pain on men who are helpless, and who should be treated as our guests. And these lads"—he motioned to Peter and Jim, standing motionless, fascinated by the spectacle, staring first at one man and then the other—"were brought here

by me. They are sacred to me and our gods. They are not your prisoners, Ben Ghool, they are mine. I no longer request—I demand that they shall be returned to me!"

Ben Ghool drew himself up to his full height; it was obvious that he would never give his consent.

"You cannot demand, Ben Mardi; and your request is refused. They are *our* prisoners—prisoners of Berran—neither yours nor mine. Now do you understand?"

CHAPTER XIX

A TERRIBLE ORDEAL

FOR at least a minute after Ben Ghool finished speaking, that strained, nerve-wracking silence fell over the Council Chamber of Berran. The lads felt it more keenly than ever, and they prayed that their ordeal would soon be over. Jim Spenser did notice that the roar of approval which had followed Ben Ghool's outbursts before had not come this time, but whether that was favourable or not he did not know.

Once again Ben Mardi's voice broke the silence.

"There is still the vote," he said, and without another word he sat down.

The oldish man who had intervened before, spoke before Ben Ghool could rise.

"The vote shall be taken, Ben Ghool. It is the law."

Ben Ghool growled under his breath, but raised no protest. In that same strained silence, each man present took a small disc from somewhere inside his robes. The only thing the lads noticed was that some were green, and some were red.

What were they? What did this ceremony mean?

It was Ben Ghool who told them; for the first time he spoke to them direct.

"Those who show green are for you, Englishmen! You will see the red will number most!"

Peter shivered; Jim felt his head reeling under the strain, but somehow he kept upright. Once again Ben Mardi flashed them an encouraging smile; and then the old man went from man to man, collecting the discs. They were pierced, and he hung them on small hooks that were screwed into a board which he carried.

The first was red.

The second was red!

The lads saw that dread colour, and their tension increased. Both of them were shivering now, their mouths felt dry, their eyes hot. They stared at the discs until the little things which spelt life or death seemed to jump about.

With agonising slowness the old man moved to the third Councillor; and a green disc glinted!

Ben Mardi came next, and his disc, also green, levelled the score. There was a dread fascination about it, and yet it still seemed incredible that their life hung on this voting.

Two against two; what would the next be? Why didn't the man hurry? He *must* hurry——

The fifth was red!

Three two against them now; but Ben Addi,

Mardi's companion, was next; and he showed green. Three all.

It was like a ghastly football match, when they played for their lives instead of for the fruits of victory. Three all.

How simple the words sounded, and yet how vital they were!

They knew that Ben Ghool would show a red disc. There were five votes left, and to win they must get three of them. The old man stopped in front of his own chair, and hung the green disc.

Four-all, for Ghool voted now. Gad, this was dreadful! The suspense was more than they could bear. Peter muttered something under his breath, and only the pressure of Jim's fingers on his friend's arm stopped Peter from crying out.

The ninth man voted, and for a moment they could not see the colour; then with a deep intake of breath they saw the red. And the tenth man voted red.

It was then that Peter Mason collapsed.

He uttered a single cry, and then dropped down in an unconscious heap. For the life of him Jim Spenser could not force himself to bend over his friend; the fascination of those next to discs was greater than anything else. No one glanced towards the unconscious lad; no one seemed to care.

The eleventh disc went on; and Jim Spenser's heart seemed to turn over as he saw it gleaming

red; and seemed dead and heavy inside him when he saw the last disc; the red disc that spelt the end!

They had lost in that grim duel; all Mardi's efforts had failed. They were finished—finished —*finished!*

Jim swayed on his feet; he hardly knew how he retained his senses, and he almost wished that they would leave him, and give him a temporary merciful freedom from this torture. But his eyes kept open, and somehow his legs carried him. His tongue and his lips were dry as he stared at Ben Ghool.

The leader of the Council was on his feet now, and a vile grin was on his heavy, bearded face.

"So you have had your way, Ben Mardi, and you have lost."

"It is a day," said Ben Mardi, with an effort that everyone could see, "that I shall regret, and you will regret, until the end of our lives. May I leave the Council?"

Ben Ghool looked as though he would gladly have killed the man who had opposed him; but he nodded, without speaking. Slowly, majestically, Ben Mardi walked down the steps from the dais, passed within a yard of Jim Spenser, and then walked towards the door with slow, measured tread.

But for one thing Jim would have felt worse than he had ever been in his life before. That

one thing was little enough, and yet somehow it gave him hope. For Mardi's expression had been encouraging as he had passed—as if he had been beaten on the first round, but was prepared to fight again.

Jim had no time for thinking after that.

As if from nowhere, a dozen of the fierce-looking guards entered the Chamber. Four of them marched towards the two lads; Peter was picked up and carried by two of them; Jim was marched between the other two, towards the entrance opposite that through which he had come.

As in a dream, he walked onwards; through the portico, into a wide passage, lined with soldiers, towards stairs which led downwards this time and not up; two dozen steps and then a narrow passage in which light filtered through small windows built in the wall but hardly big enough for a dog to get through.

So they were to be thrown in dungeons; the fate they had feared was to be theirs. And the horrible threats of Ben Ghool made Jim Spenser more afraid than ever he had been in his life before.

One of the guards stopped by a narrow door, and pushed a key into the lock. The door squeaked open, and Peter was carried through. Jim was pushed after him, the door banged to, the key turned in the lock, and then the heavy tread of the guards echoed away.

Their last day of freedom was behind them; and the morrow might bring horrors such as they had never conceived.

. . . . .

Mark Gresham and Bob Denver had no idea of the fight which had been waged over the two lads; it had never occurred to them that Ben Mardi would battle for them against heavy odds. They were prepared for the worst, and they realised that if anything was to be done, it must be done quickly.

For their flight over Berran—the capital of the country had the same name as the nation itself—had shown them that preparations for war were on foot!

From the air they had seen that Berran was fortified against attack, and it was easily believed that aerial warfare was anticipated, and anti-aircraft guns had been installed. Outside the city itself the land was so mountainous that thousands of armed warriors could hide in it, and not be seen from the air. Moreover, the men would be reasonably safe against bombing —a fact which Mark Gresham had known when he had told Peter Mason's father that the country was practically impregnable. The same fact, moreover, had given Ben Ghool the confidence to say that he did not fear the might of England.

The two airmen flew from Berran back into Afghanistan, and landed at an Air Force base

near Kabul for refuelling, and to report by radio-telephone to London.

The other six men from England had not yet arrived, and Mark Gresham did not expect them until the evening. He climbed out of his seat, unfastened his helmet, and jumped out of the cabin. An Air Force officer came to greet him, hand outstretched.

"Ho-ho! It's you, Gresham! Still looking for trouble?"

Mark Gresham laughed, although he did not feel in the mood for humour.

"I've found it, Kennley!"

"Trouble, eh?" Squadron-Commander Kennley, a grizzled, rugged looking man, whistled. "That sounds bad."

"You could take all the bad things you've heard about," grunted Bob Denver, close behind Mark Gresham, and looking more doleful than ever, "add them to all the things you dream about, and you wouldn't have anything like as nasty a spot as we've got. Tell him, Mark."

Gresham explained quickly, and the Air Force man looked very grave.

"I've heard rumours that the Berranese are massing," he said. "It looks as though they're going to make another raid over the border. The trouble is, we can't do much against the blighters!"

"You're telling me?" grumbled Denver.

"Sorry," said Kennley. "I know you must be

devilishly worried. How long have the youngsters been there?"

"Since last night, as far as we know," said Gresham. "Anyhow, let's have a wash and something to eat. Then we'll get over again, and see if we can find anything."

"If you want any help," Kennley offered, "I've three flights available."

Mark Gresham grimaced.

"I've strict orders to keep this private," he said, "but if the worst came to the worst I might call on you to lend a hand."

Little more was said until the fliers had refreshed themselves. Kennley pressed them to have a few hours' sleep, but each man had managed to get a nap during the flight from England, and neither of them felt that they dared lose any time.

In little more than an hour after their arrival they were ready to take off again. They smoked a cigarette while the mechanics finished overhauling the engines and refuelling the tanks. Denver threw the stub of his cigarette away at last, and grunted:

"Ready, Mark?"

"All fit," said Gresham.

Kennley shook hands with them each in turn.

"The very best of luck," he said. "And don't forget if I can do anything, I'm ready."

"We'll remember," Mark assured him.

A few seconds later the cabin door was closed, and the *Eagle* moved off, slowly at first but quickly gathering speed. In a few seconds its wheels were off the ground. Mark pulled back on the stick, and the nose of the machine pointed towards the blue skies.

The sun was high in the heavens now, and even in the cabin the heat was stifling. Both men eased their collars, and settled down for the three quarters of an hour's flying to Berran. All they proposed to do was to keep a watch on the city. Later—that night with any luck—they were to return again with the other six men from England, and make the attempt at rescuing. But in their hearts both Mark Gresham and Bob Denver did not feel that the prospect was rosy.

They had not been in the air for more than five minutes, before Bob Denver, glancing behind him, stiffened in surprise.

"Stall her, Mark! Someone coming!"

"Coming after us?" Mark Gresham seemed incredulous, but he half-turned the 'plane. As he did so he saw that his friend had told nothing but the truth. Three aeroplanes—a flight in military terminology—were flying in their wake.

"Kennley's making sure we don't get lost," said Mark Gresham with a grim smile. "He's a good sort, but I don't want them mixed up in this if it's humanly possible to avoid it."

"That's all right as far as it goes," said Bob, "but they might have a message for us."

"It isn't likely," said Mark Gresham, "but we'll see."

He turned the *Eagle* right round now, and flew back towards the fast-approaching flight. Less than sixty seconds passed before Denver, watching the other 'planes through the long-distance glasses, snapped out:

"They're signalling!"

"Are they, by Jove! I wonder why they didn't use the wireless?"

"To make sure no one else picked up the message, I take it," said Bob Denver. He was grinning, and for some reason that he could not properly explain, he felt more cheerful than he had done since the news of the lads' disappearance had first been taken to him.

Now the flight was near enough for all the men to be seen with the naked eye. Suddenly Bob Denver—the observer in the *Eagle*—saw a white light show, very dimly, in the cabin of the nearest 'plane. He waited, and the light came again.

"A message coming," he snapped.

"Take it," said Mark Gresham.

Bob Denver obeyed. Time and time again the flash came, although all he could see was just a white circle of light, for the rays of the light from the electric torch were lost in the more brilliant light of the sun.

At last he had the message, and he repeated it quickly.

"*Return to base. Urgent message waiting.*"

"I wonder what the deuce that can be?" muttered Mark Gresham, but even as he was speaking he opened the throttle wider. The faster *Eagle* flashed past the military 'planes, and the two occupants saw the other's crew smiling.

Three minutes went by before they sighted the base. With aching impatience, Mark Gresham 'planed downwards. Now he could see the hangars, the landing-field, and two or three men who looked like little dots on the ground. As the 'plane went down they grew larger and larger; soon they were almost life-size.

The wheels of the *Eagle* bumped against the ground, the machine went up a few feet, dropped again, and then ran smoothly along to a standstill. Mark was out of the seat in a trice, but Bob Denver banged his injured leg on a seat, and was a full minute behind his friend.

But he was in time to hear Kennley's words.

"Thank heavens we caught you, Gresham! I daren't radio, in case they picked the message up at Berran, and I didn't want them to smell a rat. Tell me—do you know a man named Mardi?"

"I do," said Mark Gresham grimly. "Why?"

"He's sent a message," said Kennley.

"Marked private and confidential, and addressed to you."

"Sent a message? But how on earth could he deliver it?" Mark Gresham spoke as he took the envelope from Kennley's hand, and looked at it as though it was a figment of the imagination.

"By that," said Kennley, with a grin.

As he spoke he turned round, and pointed to a gigantic blackie who had been half-hidden by another 'plane. And for the first time Mark Gresham and Bob Denver found themselves looking into the smiling face of Bakku—Ben Mardi's huge servant!

CHAPTER XX

PREPARATIONS FOR ESCAPE!

MARK GRESHAM's first reaction after seeing the letter and knowing who it was from, was to feel that there was a trick somewhere. He knew Ben Mardi reasonably well, and although he believed that the man was not the worst of the barbarians of the Council of Berran, he knew he was cruel in many ways, and that he had a deep hatred of the English—or so it was reputed. But Mark also knew that Mardi hated the ruler of the Council—Ben Ghool—and that the hatred was mutual. Had something happened between those two men?

Mark ripped open the envelope, and read the words eagerly, with Bob Denver and Kennley reading over his shoulder. The letter ran:

"MARK GRESHAM,

"You will be surprised to hear from me; you will be more surprised by what you read. Let me first say two things. That by bravery unequalled in my experience, Spenser saved my life, and that of my companions. And as a result of attempting to place the lads under the protection of my Priests, my oft-talked-of quarrel with Ben Ghool has come to

a head. Knowing those things, you will be more likely to believe what I say here.

"The Council has decided to keep the two lads for their pleasure. You know of the barbaric practices prevailing here—you have, in fact, witnessed one of them. You need no more telling what that means. I fought hard to prevent it, and failed. But thanks to my position as High Priest of Berran, I have adherents even among Ghool's palace guard.

"I may be able to arrange for the lads to escape; I cannot take them far from here, without arousing the suspicions of Ghool. So I am going to suggest that you fly to a point eight miles west of Berran. There is a large, flat area there, and you cannot mistake the place. Go there and wait there. I will bring your friends, and from that point their safety is in your hands.

"There is no trick; I do not believe in trickery in an affair of this nature. But realise, please, that this does not in any way affect my attitude towards you, nor my desire to obtain those documents which you stole from Ghool's palace some months ago. I am not declaring peace. I am trying to save the lives of two deserving members of your race.

"Ben Mardi."

The letter was signed with a flourish, and sealed with Mardi's private seal. For a few minutes the three men could hardly speak.

Then Mark Gresham shook his head, as though he was recovering from a heavy blow.

"That's the last I'd have expected from Mardi," he said in a low voice.

"Do you think it's a trick?" asked Kennley.

"No. Mardi is a queer fellow, and my experience of him is that he will never tell a direct lie. Had it been a trick, he would have made no reference to that possibility. His definite assurance that it is not one satisfies me."

"I'm with you there," Bob Denver admitted.

"Do you know that bare patch?" Kennley asked.

"Yes—I know it well. So do you, I expect."

"I've an idea where it is," admitted Kennley. "Well—you're going to do as he suggests?"

"I am," said Mark Gresham grimly. "We stood a chance in a hundred any other way. We've a fifty-fifty chance now. And I'm not going to lose any time. Ready, Bob?"

"Ready for anything," Bob Denver assured him, and the two airmen hurried back to the *Eagle*. By the time they had reached it Bakku, his grin as wide as ever, had slipped away, and already he was moving in a fast, loping run, towards Berran. The stamina of the man was immense, Mark Gresham realised.

The *Eagle* took off again, and little more than half an hour's flying led them to the clear patch that Ben Mardi had mentioned in his letter.

It was a queer, natural phenomenon, for it

was between two towering hills. By all the rules of nature the intervening land should have been rocky and dangerous; instead it was comparatively smooth, and in a dozen places it was possible for aeroplanes to land with safety. Mark Gresham had had the place in mind when he had first realised the necessity of flying to Berran in the wake of the kidnapped schoolboys.

They reached the spot quickly, and landed without trouble. As far as they could tell, it was about three o'clock, English time, and there were several hours of daylight left yet. They did not know whether to expect developments that day, during the night, or on the following night, but they were well-stocked with provisions, and were prepared to wait as long as necessary.

Taking it in turns, they slept and stood guard. Darkness fell about them, dim, mysterious. Hardly a sound disturbed the stillness, and heavy clouds covered the stars.

But they were ready and waiting—and praying in their hearts that Ben Mardi would succeed in what he was trying to do. Time and time again they wondered what Jim Spenser and Peter Mason were doing; and they were hoping against hope that the brutal Ben Ghool was too busy to be "entertained" that night.

. . . . .

To Jim Spenser the waiting seemed ageless. It might have been an hour or it might have

been twelve since he had been flung into the small cell which was now his prison, and Peter had been dropped beside him. Peter was still out—he had groaned in his unconsciousness once or twice, but Jim realised his friend's strength had not been up to the ordeal which they had been forced to suffer. Sometimes Jim tried to persuade himself that watching that ghastly voting ceremony, waiting until each man handed his red or green disc, feeling each time that his fate was in the balance, had been worse than any actual torture could be.

He failed to convince himself.

Like most lads of his age he had read books on the Spanish Inquisition, and it was well known that some of the priests of that dreadful order had caused pain simply for the sake of it. And in a similar way, although possibly even more barbaric, the Councillors of Berran found their pleasure in watching others suffer.

He knew, moreover, that certain Indian sects were specialists in torture, that African native tribes did terrible things to their victims, and that even to-day some of the Mexican people were dreadfully cruel. But the thought of being mixed up in such a thing itself was very different from reading about it. From time to time he shivered, and then tried to think of the possibility of escape.

Escape—escape! That thought had been with him all the time. And now an idea presented

itself, which gave him a glimmering of hope—like a drowning man clutching at a straw.

If by some conceivable chance he and Peter could get away from Ben Ghool's underground cell, it was reasonably safe to assume that Ben Mardi would be prepared to help them.

Ben Mardi's courage at that meeting, when all had been against him at first, inspired Jim Spenser with a greater cheerfulness. It was madness to despair when a man of Mardi's courage was on his side.

And, of course, there was Mark Gresham, whose 'plane had flown over Berran that morning.

It was obvious now that Mark Gresham and Bob Denver had, up to a point, fallen into a trap, Ben Mardi had guessed they would immediately follow and, once in Berran, would be easy captures. But Jim remembered Mark Gresham's firm, rugged face, and he did not believe the man would ever be an easy victim. Mark had come into this with his eyes open; of that Jim was sure.

He drew a deep breath, and moved across to his friend.

There were two wooden planks, fixed to the wall, to serve as beds, and he had lifted Peter up on one. He felt very worried when he looked at Peter's pale face, but he knew there was nothing he could do.

And then, very suddenly, Peter blinked and opened his eyes! For a moment he looked about

him dazedly; then he recognised Jim, and memory flooded back.

"Hall, old man. So we're in a fix."

"We'll get out of it," said Jim with a cheerfulness that he certainly did not feel. His friend smiled.

"We'll try, anyhow. Sorry I faded out, Jim."

"Hang it, old man, you didn't want to! I——"

That was as far as Jim got, for there was a sound of footsteps in the passage outside—the first sound that had disturbed the dreadful silence of the prison!

Both lads waited, against the wall, with their eyes on the door. The footsteps stopped, and the key was pushed in the lock. A moment later the door opened, and they saw a wizened old man, robed from neck to feet in a white dress, stand for a moment in the doorway. He was carrying a tray in his hands, and Jim could not help but remember the way tea had been brought to him that morning.

"At least," he said to Peter, "they aren't going to starve us. I wonder if he can speak English."

The wizened man didn't appear to understand the words. Without any change of expression he put the tray down on one of the benches, and then went out, locking the door behind him. The youngsters, their hunger suddenly stirred, hurried to the tray. There was some bread and a large

bowl of thick soup—different rations from what they had had in Mardi's palace, but welcome enough.

Jim shared the soup out, ladling it with a wooden spoon into two dishes that had been provided. He was almost at the bottom of the dish when the spoon hit against something hard. He took it for granted that it was a lump of meat; instead he gaped when he saw that it was a disc, about three inches in diameter.

A disc—and when the soup had run off it, they saw that it was green!

For a moment they were too surprised to think; then with a cry Jim took it, whipped his handkerchief from his pocket and dried it. All thought of food had gone. That this was a message, cunningly delivered, they were convinced; and only Mardi would have sent it!

For a few seconds they looked as if they were to be doomed to disappointment. Then Peter saw that there was a very thin line, like that of a pocket watch, running round the edge of the disc. With a great effort, he forced it open with his thumb nail. He broke the nail—but as a small piece of paper dropped out he forgot the pain of it!

There *was* a message!

Jim grabbed the paper and opened it quickly. Trembling so much that they could hardly see the written words, the two lads read eagerly, almost desperately.

The letter was short enough, but they felt like new men as they finished. It ran:

"You are safe until to-morrow morning. During the night you will be released. The agent will wear a green turban and green sandals. Do not go with anyone wearing different colours. When you are outside, do exactly as you are told.

"This disc is clean—it will harm no food. Hide it quickly, and destroy the paper, either by burning, if possible, or by swallowing it.

"BEN MARDI."

That was all—but it gave them a new lease of life. They could hardly restrain themselves for a few seconds. Then Jim sobered up, and spoke quickly.

"We'd better swallow the paper—half each, eh? And then we'll——"

It was as far as he got, for they heard the sound of the key turning in the lock again. They had been so excited before that they had not heard the newcomer's approach. Now they realised whoever it was would be in the cell within a few seconds—and they could not be sure whether it was friend or foe.

CHAPTER XXI

BEN GHOOL AGAIN!

PETER and Jim seemed to have been taken by surprise a dozen times in the past few days, and each surprise had seemed a great deal more unexpected than the previous one. Now, with the hope of escape high in their breasts, and the promise of help from Ben Mardi, they watched the opening door as though fascinated. It was possible that developments which followed might deal the death blow to their hopes; even Ben Mardi was not all powerful here.

Who would it be?

There seemed something cruel in the very slowness of the way the door was opened. Jim uttered an exclamation as he saw, at last, the short man standing in the doorway with a flowing red robe which dragged in the dust at his feet. They had never seen the man before but all he did was to stand by the door and then bow so low that his head was almost touching his knees. Then a second figure appeared—and the two lads went cold.

Ben Ghool was here!

It was impossible for them to mistake him. That bearded, evil face had been graven on

their minds for ever. Close to, his glittering eyes seemed even more cruel, and they could see his thick red lips, and the sharp, filed teeth.

The lads did not cringe away; whatever happened they would meet their fate bravely. Jim's eyes were gleaming, and his lips were set tight, while all the time he was wondering what this meant and what would happen. Mardi had assured them they would be safe until the following day. Was that true? Or had there been some change in the arrangements? Ben Ghool would be cunning enough to do that, for he might suspect that the High Priest of Berran would not accept the verdict of the High Council.

The lads did not know the laws of Berran, or the habits of its people.

When the High Council voted, that was the supreme law, and no one in the history of the country had fought against it without finding death as his reward. Ben Mardi was risking more than any of the lads could have conceived.

He was doing it for their sakes—but there was another reason, and one which strengthened him. For many years the hostility between himself and Ben Ghool had been near boiling point; now it was admitted, and Mardi was plotting, behind the high walls of his palace. Even Ben Ghool, however, did not suspect it.

But the lads did not know that; they were

faced only by Ben Ghool, as he stalked majestically into the room, and eyed them. He was smiling, and Jim was reminded of the smile of a tiger at the Zoo.

"So," he said at last, in his deep voice that quivered about the walls of the cell, "you are the Englishers that Mardi would save. Save! Pah! The man is mad, or he would never have dared fight against me!"

He glared at them—and Peter suddenly realised what he was doing. He had come here just to see them, and to gloat. That much seemed certain.

But what would happen if he saw the paper and the green disc?

Jim had the disc, slipped into his pocket; Peter had the letter, crumpled up in his hand, and his fingers were twitching. If Ben Ghool found that letter, anything might happen!

It was Jim who spoke next. He held his head high, and spoke proudly.

"He was a wise man," he assured Ben Ghool. "England is no country to be played with, Ben Ghool, and you will regret if you ever harm us!"

"Regret it!" Ben Ghool roared with laughter, holding his sides and leaning his head well back. "Ho! Ho! Ho! I will regret it will I, my little sparrow! And who are you that the great English Government should worry about? Perhaps you are the son of a reigning prince, or a millionaire? And perhaps you are not, eh?"

In between the words gusts of his laughter rang out, and Jim couldn't stop himself from thinking of the Giant in the Jack the Giant-killer pantomime.

Jim smiled grimly.

"It is easy for you to laugh now. I wonder whether you will laugh when the aeroplanes come here, and the bombs are dropped on this palace? There will be little to laugh about then, Ben Ghool!"

For a moment he was afraid that he had uttered his own death knell. For the laughing giant was suddenly transformed into a raging beast. His eyes glared, his hairy fists shot out and gripped Jim's shoulders, shaking him like a rat. Jim's very teeth rattled in the power of the ferocious beast! His head was whirring, there was a now familiar roaring in his ears——

He couldn't think, but now he was really, dreadfully afraid.

Peter's fingers were clenching; he hated to see this horrible attack, but for the moment it seemed there was nothing he could do. Then, as Jim seemed to droop, his anger knew no bounds, and without thinking he flung himself at Ben Ghool!

The big man swayed back beneath the assault, and released Jim. Peter was on him, punching, kicking, doing everything he could. For a few moments he had the better of the battle, but he did not see the man in the red

robe approaching. Even without the man, Ben Ghool must have recovered in time to crush the youngster; but Jim, who had not been as near unconsciousness as he had pretended, saw the man in the red robe, and the knife which glittered in his hand.

Jim followed Peter's example, and flung himself forward. He reached the red-robed man before the fellow was aware that he had recovered consciousness. A terrific right to the fellow's chin sent him staggering, and the knife clattered to the ground.

Jim Spenser had an easier opponent than Peter.

The man in the red robes was small and puny. He was helpless against the fierce rush from the youngster, particularly after that first terrible blow. Right-left-right Jim slugged into him, and suddenly the man uttered a high-pitched cry and dropped in a crumpled heap on the floor.

Jim stopped for a moment, flushed with victory, his eyes sparkling, his arms and legs fit for anything now. He saw the other fighter —and then he saw Ben Ghool send Peter reeling back with a blow which, had it been direct, would have floored an ox. Happily it just missed Peter's chin, struck his shoulder, and crashed him back against the wall.

Ben Ghool, terrible in his fury, swung round towards Jim. With fists alone Jim would have been helpless.

But at his feet was the knife which the red-robed man had dropped!

In a flash Jim stooped and picked it up. Ben Ghool was a couple of yards from him, but he stopped instinctively at the sight of the sturdy, defiant youth, with gleaming eyes and set chin, poising the knife high.

"Come a step further, Ben Ghool, and I will kill you!"

Ben Ghool knew that it was no idle threat. He had come to make sure that Ben Mardi had been right when he had talked of these lads' courage—and he had learned there was no mistake. He had come with only one servant —and now he realised the folly of it. But who would have dreamed that two helpless lads would have dared to defy the great Ben Ghool? The possibility of danger had not once entered his head.

He stayed where he was, his eyes afire, his great hands clenched. Jim hardly knew what to do next. Then to his relief he saw Peter struggling to his feet.

"You all right, Pete?"

"Not—so bad," Peter gasped.

"Hold tight for a minute, and get steady. Ben Ghool, don't move!"

He flashed the other words out as the leader of the High Council of Berran made a spasmodic movement towards the large, scimitar-shaped knife in his belt. The movement gave Jim

an idea and his eyes glistened. The seconds ticked by, until he could see that Peter was reasonably fit again. Then:

"Take his knife, Peter—and his belt!"

Peter obeyed without question. Ben Ghool, who could have killed either lad with one direct blow, knew that it was impossible for him to resist. These lads faced death and torture. They stood to lose nothing, whether they killed him or not.

He was feeling cooler now, moreover.

He knew that they might get out of the cell, but they would never be able to get past the guards in the upper floors of the palace. He told himself that he would be content to wait, letting them do what they liked with him. Later he could have his revenge—and they would realise what happened to heathen Englishers who defied the great Ben Ghool!

Neither lad knew anything of this. The flush of victory was in their eyes. Peter slipped the knife out of the belt, and took the belt itself.

"What next?" he asked.

"Put your hands behind you, Ben Ghool," Jim snapped. "Peter—tie his wrists!"

Just once Ben Ghool looked as though he could not withstand the indignity of having his hands bound, but Jim made a threatening motion with the knife, and the giant Berranese leader stopped moving, and then obeyed. Peter

thanked his stars that he had once learned some of the more intricate sailor's knots in the gymnasium at school. He made a wonderful job of Ben Ghool's wrists, while the leader of the High Council swore viciously that they would suffer the pains of hell before he had finished with them!

But for the moment he was helpless!

Jim knew just what he would do now, but until Ben Ghool's legs were tied in the same way as his hands he did not propose to take any chances.

"Now take your own belt, and do his ankles," he told Peter, and Peter grinned. He obeyed quickly, although once Ben Ghool lashed out with his feet.

Jim took a step forward, his eyes narrowed. The point of the knife touched the skin of Ben Ghool's neck.

"Keep very still," he said grimly.

Ben Ghool, with the prick of the knife very sharp, had no option but to obey. If he moved he stood the risk of the knife cutting into his neck. In less than two minutes he was standing like a top, unable to move his arms or legs.

"Now we'll put him on one of the benches," snapped Jim, "and see how he likes them."

They saw no reason for treating the man gently. Jim pushed him, and he toppled over, thudding against the floor. As they dragged him

towards the bench and hoisted him on it, his eyes were little pools of evil.

"You'd like to do a lot of things to us, wouldn't you?" Jim said coolly. "Well, you're not going to have the chance."

As he spoke they finished hoisting the helpless Ben Ghool, and Jim took his handkerchief from his pocket. He knotted it round the man's face, tightly across the mouth, and Ben Ghool was not only bound but gagged. He could raise neither a finger nor a shout!

Peter didn't know why, but he suddenly started chuckling. Jim followed suit, and for two minutes the cell rang to their laughter. But they sobered up at last, and then paid attention to the still unconscious man in the red robes.

"We're going to take his robe off," Jim said, "and then deal with him just as we have with Ben Ghool. You or I can wear the thing, and it should help us to get away."

"There's a chance anyhow," said Peter, his eyes glistening. "Good idea, Jim."

"We'll see London again after all," chuckled Jim Spenser.

Then he stopped; and the smiles left the faces of the two lads. For the third time that evening they heard the key going in the lock, although again they had not heard the approach of whoever was outside.

This time they were not so helpless.

"Get behind the door with a knife!" Jim hissed. "I'll see who it is, and wink to you if you've got to get busy. Don't be squeamish, old son. They'd kill us if we don't kill them!"

Peter nodded, and was behind the door in a trice. It opened as slowly as ever—it was a heavy door, and no one could open it quickly—while Jim Spenser stood in the doorway, waiting, watching, and wondering whether their luck was broken.

And then he gasped.

For the man who appeared in the doorway wore a green turban—and green slippers! There was something familiar about his face above his beard.

He eyed Jim with narrowed eyes; then he glanced across the room towards the body of Ben Ghool—and his lips opened.

"Great Heavens! How on earth did you do that? I've never seen anything like it in my life!"

It was Ben Mardi, disguised with a beard, but unable to disguise his voice! And the admiration in his eyes gleamed more deeply than ever!

The two lads explained quickly. Mardi chuckled as they described Ben Ghool's reactions to the indignity they had forced on him, and he glanced over at the helpless leader.

"Ben Ghool will realise that I wasn't joking," he said.

A sudden, worrying thought occurred to Peter, and he spoke in an undertone.

"But won't there be trouble for you now? He must recognise your voice, and we can't prevent him from hearing what we say."

Ben Mardi shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"Under the rule of Ben Ghool," he said, "I am finished in Berran. It remains to be seen whether it will be possible to have another ruler. But for the moment we must get you out of here."

"Is anything arranged?" Jim asked.

"Yes. You'll follow me and, as I told you in the letter, trust anyone wearing green sandals *and* a green turban. But in case of accidents, you'll find these more useful than those cut-throat knives."

As he spoke he slipped his hand from his pocket, and drew two automatics out. He handed one to each lad, and for the first time Peter and Jim handled firearms. The guns were light enough, and Ben Mardi showed them how to handle them quickly.

"The gun is useless unless you release that safety catch," he said, touching a small piece of metal at the side of the gun. "If you want to fire once, just release that and touch the trigger. If you want to keep firing, have your finger on the trigger all the time. But remember you want to save your bullets."

"We'll remember," Jim promised. "This is wonderful of you, Ben Mardi!"

Mardi's smile, this time, was very different from anything they had seen before.

"I am doing it for myself as well as for you," he said. "But I will always salute bravery. In any case, Ben Ghool and I were due for a battle, and it has come only about the time that it was expected. But there is no time for talking. Follow me—and if I say shoot, don't hesitate!"

Both lads nodded, tight-lipped. Guns in hand they went towards the open door of the cell. They reached it—and then Ben Mardi lifted a warning hand. The others heard the footsteps padding along the corridor, and they were ready for trouble. But a moment later Ben Addi burst into sight.

Like Ben Mardi, Addi would never forget the bravery which had saved his life in the aeroplane. In any case he was a member of the priesthood of Berran, and therefore faithful to the High Priest.

He was breathing hard, and he paused for a moment, leaning against the wall. Then his words came, very clearly—and seeming to dispel the hopes which had grown so quickly.

"Ghool's guards are coming—twelve of them! They cannot understand why he is so long!"

CHAPTER XXII

A FIGHT AGAINST ODDS

BEN GHOOL'S guards were coming!

That was the only thought in the minds of the two lads. Twelve of those ferocious, armed men, who would think nothing of shooting them down. Twelve against four—the odds were too heavy, their plight was hopeless.

Ben Mardi obviously did not think so.

He nodded, and swung round to the youngsters.

"Continue to do exactly as I tell you, and do not worry!"

The words gave them a confidence that they had lacked before, and they listened eagerly as Ben Mardi went on.

"Stay in here, keeping your guns in your pockets. Stay over by the door, and take no notice of what I say to the men. Is that clear?"

Jim and Peter nodded, and backed against the wall. As they reached it, the sound of heavy marching feet came clearly. In a few seconds they could hear the clink of metal.

"Ben Addi—go and beckon them!" snapped Ben Mardi.

The others waited on tenterhooks. They saw Ben Addi calling the guards, and in less than thirty seconds the captain was in the cell. He was a huge, frightening looking man, and when he saw Ben Ghool stretched out on the bench, his teeth were bared and, lifting his scimitar, he took a step towards the lads. Peter gasped; Jim felt a shiver run down his spine; but before the man could do anything, Mardi snapped out.

"Attend to them afterwards. Look after Ben Ghool. What manner of guards are you that this could happen?"

The captain shrank back from the fury in Ben Mardi's voice and eyes.

"He told us to wait, Highness——"

"And you waited long enough for these English boys to do so much! I would not be in your place, Captain, when Ben Ghool is free. Set two guards outside. Bring the others in!"

Jim and Peter realised this was the testing time.

They could see behind Ben Mardi's plan, and they admired it immensely. If the cell was filled with the soldiers, there was a possibility of *locking them all in!*

Perhaps the Captain would have refused, but for the knowledge that he had allowed this thing to happen to Ben Ghool. He was frightened of Ben Mardi, even though he knew his imme-

diate leader hated the High Priest. At the moment, however, he obeyed.

He snapped an order in Berranese. Nine of the other soldiers filed into the cell; Mardi nodded to Peter and Jim, and they took a half step towards the door.

Then Ben Addi slipped into the passage; Jim saw his gun as he levelled it against the two guards. They drew back in surprise, but before the Captain realised what was happening, Ben Mardi's gun was out!

"Spenser—Mason—do the same!"

There was a startled silence as the other two guns were whipped out. The Captain seemed to sway on his feet; then he uttered a bull like roar, and leapt towards Mardi.

The High Priest didn't hesitate.

He touched the trigger of his gun, and a stab of flame whipped out. The bullet took the big man in the chest. He uttered a high-pitched cry and then dropped backwards, into the ranks of his men. Two of them lost their balance and fell, and for a few seconds confusion reigned in the cell!

Mardi's eyes were afire.

"In the passage both of you! Guards"—he spoke now in Berranese, although the lads could catch the drift of what he was saying—"if anyone moves, it means death!"

Very quickly the lads reached the passage. Ben Addi had the outside guards covered. Ben

Mardi kept the others cowering against the wall, and then snapped to one of them.

"Give me the Captain's keys!"

The man obyed, trembling all the time. Mardi took the keys and then backed quickly out of the cell. The heavy door banged, and he turned the key in the lock quickly.

"That is good," he snapped. "They can shout for hours down here without being heard! Help me with these fellows."

"These fellows" were the two remaining guards. Ben Mardi cracked the butt of his gun over the head of one of them, and Ben Addi followed suit on the other. The men collapsed, unconscious. With two of them working on each man, they were trussed up and gagged very quickly.

Mardi was breathing fast when the job was finished.

"We are doing well," he said, "but the walk through the palace will be difficult. Come."

They walked along the passage, their hearts thumping. Mardi took the lead, the two lads followed, and Ben Addi was in the rear. They could not help thinking how strange it was that the two men who had brought them here were helping to get them away, but there was little or no time for thinking.

Up the flights of steps they hurried, to the ground floor of the palace. Now the danger

was more acute than it had been before. If any of Ben Ghool's servants saw and recognised the two lads, there would be the devil to pay—unless Ben Mardi shot first!

Very slowly, and keeping to the lesser-known passages, the little party went on. Not once did they meet another man until they reached the main hall of the palace. Then the guards at the doors provided another barrier.

There was no chance of tricking the men here.

Ben Mardi knew that there were dozens of them within call, and the only thing to do was to rush.

He paused for a moment, speaking slowly.

"Shoot as you go, and don't worry. If you don't hit them they'll hit you. Follow me, but if I get hurt, rush to the entrance of the palace grounds. You will be all right then for a while. Is that clear?"

"Quite clear," Jim whispered.

"Good. Now—ready!"

As he spoke he broke the cover of the portico which had been hiding them, and entered the hall. He walked swiftly, intending to get as near the main door as he could without raising an alarm. Four guns were cocked and ready for action.

They were half-way towards the door, some ten yards away from it, when the first guard saw them.

His eyes widened, and he snapped something

out in Berranese. As he did so the half-a-dozen armed men swung round, grabbing at their rifles.

But Ben Mardi fired first.

The bullet hissed from his gun, and took one man through the chest. The fellow flung up his arms and went down. Ben Addi sent another flying. Jim touched the trigger of his gun, saw the stab of flame go out, and then saw one of the guards drop his rifle and hop about madly on one leg. Only Peter's shot missed, by a fraction of an inch!

But they were running now, and Mardi was firing. The fourth man went down before the guards fired a single shot in reply.

But the loud report of the rifle cracked through the hall, and must have been heard by a dozen men! All the automatics were fitted with silencers, and made little or no sound.

The bullet hummed over Peter's head, and cracked into the wall behind him. But Peter's second shot took the firer through the arm, and his gun clattered to the ground.

Bedlam ruled now!

Footsteps were thudding through the hall, voices were raised, here and there a shot came. Bullets began to fly dangerously close to the escapers, but all four of them were within a couple of yards of the door now. And only two guards were in the way.

Then Peter gasped.

A bullet took him through the thigh, and he staggered and would have fallen but for Jim's supporting arm. He clenched his teeth and tried to run, but the pain in his leg was too great.

"You—go—on!" he gasped. "I—can't—make—it!"

"Nonsense!" snapped Jim. "It isn't far!"

Ben Mardi had seen what had happened, and his lips tightened. He shot down another of the guards, and then hesitated.

"Are you all right?"

"I can't do it!" cried Peter. "I'm hit!"

Ben Mardi didn't hesitate. He swung back across the well-lit hall, and to Jim's surprise, bent down and picked the other up, hoisting him over his shoulder in fireman fashion. It did not seem possible that Ben Mardi had such strength, but he carried the lad effortlessly.

"Hurry!" he snapped to Jim.

By now the firing was coming from behind them, and a dozen bearded soldiers were rushing into the hall; but there was no one by the doorway. Had there been only three or four men behind they might have had less luck. But Ben Ghool's excited guards stumbled and got in each other's way. Not a single bullet took effect.

And Jim was outside, on the steps of the palace!

It was dark outside, excepting for the dim light from one or two electric lights, but the trees lining the long drive gave them shelter. Ben Mardi was in the lead, despite his burden; Addi was close behind, firing from time to time over his shoulder. Jim went on, his breath getting shorter, but a great hope in his mind. They *would* get through!

The gates were less than fifty yards away. Forty—thirty—twenty——

They could see the massive iron of them now; and what was worse, saw two guards put their rifles to their shoulders! Ben Mardi fired and missed; Jim Spenser touched the trigger of his gun and, as the bullet spat out, hoped against hope that he would score a hit.

He saw his man go down, and crowed aloud in triumph. The fellow crashed against the second guard, and spoiled his aim. Both men sprawled on the ground, as Ben Mardi flashed through the open gates. Jim followed him, and Ben Addi, still firing at the racing men behind him, brought up the rear. Bullets were whining over their heads, but no one else was hurt.

Then Jim saw a thing that seemed incredible! There was a long, Hispano car standing outside —a car in this place!

Mardi leapt to the running board, hoisted Peter into the tonnau, and jumped in to the driving seat. Addi went with Peter; Jim sat next to Ben Mardi.

And then the long, mad drive started!

Through the narrow streets of Berran the rakish car sped, scattering men and women and dogs in front of them. There was a shrieking, wailing, bellowing all about them, but Ben Mardi took no notice of it. He turned this way and that, never hesitating for a second. Suddenly they neared his own palace—but they did not stop. The gates of the walled city were open. Jim thought he saw a dozen men fighting, but he couldn't be sure. The only thing that mattered was that they were out of Berran, and now the Hispano was racing along the deserted, uneven road, with the stars above them twinkling in the dark heavens, and the powerful headlights of the car shooting ahead of them, eerie, ghostly, and yet invaluable.

Never had Jim travelled a rougher road.

The powerfully-sprung car bumped and lurched this way and that, but not once did the speedometer drop below the forty mark. Sometimes it was quivering near the eighty, and it seemed impossible that the wheels would hold the ground.

But they did, and what was more important, there was no sound of pursuit. A dozen times Jim looked anxiously behind him, half-expecting to find the gleam of the headlights of pursuing cars. None came.

But how long was this ride through the starlighted country to last?

They were climbing now, and the Hispano was in second gear. Mardi said nothing; he sat at the steering wheel grimly. Perhaps a dozen miles flashed beneath them; and then he turned off the road, and for the first time he spoke.

"I think you'll be all right now, Spenser."

Jim nodded, his eyes gleaming.

"It's wonderful," he said. "But—what about you?"

Ben Mardi's eyes gleamed.

"I shall look after myself," he said. "Already the revolt in Berran has started. There was a battle taking place at the gates of the city—my soldiers against Ben Ghool's. If mine win I shall have nothing to fear. If I lose—I shall have tried, at all events."

It was typical of the man to say that, and the admiration Jim had felt for him increased a hundred-fold. But for the moment he had little time for thinking, apart from the path that lay ahead. Where were they going? How were they to get out of Berran, into Afghanistan?

Jim told himself that Mardi had doubtless arranged for that, but never did he dream of what followed. The car was running over smoother ground now, even though it was off the wheels. Then suddenly the headlights shone on glistening metal—and Jim cried aloud in surprise and delight.

An aeroplane!

There was no doubt about it. Jim could see the squat outlines of the body and the wings. But there were no lights, and as far as he could see no one was near it.

Was it Mardi's 'plane? If so, that meant he was going to pilot them.

But a moment later he knew the truth. For Mardi stopped the car and jumped out. As he did so, two dark figures seemed to materialise from nowhere, and Jim heard Mark Gresham's voice.

"Thank heavens you're all right! Well done, Mardi!"

Mark was here—and Bob Denver! Jim rushed towards them, gripping their hands, but as he did so Mardi's smooth voice came out:

"It is too early yet, Gresham, to feel safe. We are here. Take the lads and get as far from Berran as you can. There is strife in the city, and Ben Ghool will do anything to get the prisoners back, or kill them. If he succeeds, it will prove his strength. If he fails, the people will believe he is less capable than he pretends, and will send him and his throne to ashes!"

Mark hesitated for a moment.

"Do you actually mean," he said at last, "that there is civil war in Berran?"

"That is what I do mean. And I must return, Gresham, to lead my followers. Already I have deserted them too long. Good-bye."

He shook hands with Spenser and Peter Mason—who was feeling happy enough even though he could not walk. Then he looked smilingly into Mark Gresham's eyes.

"Perhaps the English have good points after all," he said. "We shall see."

Without another word, he swung into the Hispano, and very soon it was racing across that flat stretch of land, towards Berran and the civil war. Jim and Peter told themselves that of all the men they had met, Ben Mardi was the bravest. He was prepared to go into battle at the head of his men, risking death and worse, should he be captured.

Mark Gresham drew a deep breath.

"He's a different man from what he was six months ago," he said. "I hope he wins! But we've no time for talking now. Into the cabin, Jim! I'll carry Peter, and then—Kabul and home!"

But even as Jim stepped into the cabin, he thought he heard the hum of engines. For a moment he believed it was from the Hispano, but suddenly he realised the truth.

There were three aeroplanes, flying from the direction of Berran, just above them!

Even as the conviction came to his mind, as Mark Gresham's lips tightened at the discovery, the first attack came. They had been sighted—and then something crashed to the earth a hundred yards away. There was a deafening

roar of the explosion, and then dirt and rocks flew through the air all about them.

Ben Ghool was not finished yet! He had sent his 'planes after them, and they were being bombed!

CHAPTER XXIII

A BATTLE IN THE AIR

THERE was no doubt of what was happening, and although none of them spoke, all four of the fliers in the cabin of the *Eagle* knew what was happening. Mark opened the throttle, and the *Eagle* lurched forward, but even as it moved there was a fear in all their minds that the next bomb would hit them. If it did, it would mean death and destruction for them all.

But it fell wide—a hundred yards away on the far side of the 'plane. The roar was muffled this time, but pieces of rock crashed against the metal sides of the *Eagle* as it went forward. The suspense was dreadful, but Bob Denver broke it as Mark pulled back on the stick.

"We'll dish 'em if we get up," he said.

"We'll try," said Mark grimly. The wheels of the aeroplane left the ground as he spoke, and they winged their way towards the skies, with the three enemy 'planes very close. "Have you youngsters got anything to shoot with?"

"I've four bullets left," said Peter.

"I've three," said Jim, taking his gun from his pocket.

"Good—that's a help. There are two auto-

matics in the bus, so we stand a chance of beating them off. The trouble is, the devils will probably have machine-guns."

Peter had not thought of that possibility, but Jim had done so, and he nodded. Now they were a thousand feet above the earth, but they could not see the enemy 'planes.

Suddenly Mark Gresham switched on the searchlight. For a few moments it carved a tremendous white light through the air; then suddenly something glittered in it, and Jim snapped the words:

"There's one of them!"

"Open the window, Bob," said Mark Gresham slowly.

Bob Denver obeyed; he crouched by the open window, as the wind rushed in, his gun ready. Jim needed no telling to follow suit by the other window, and he waited tensely. Only Peter, wounded as he was, was unable to do anything. But an idea flashed through his mind.

"Is there any spare ammunition?" he asked.

"Plenty," said Bob Denver.

"Where is it? I can reload for you then."

"That's an idea," said Mark Gresham, and he spoke as coolly as if they were on a normal flight, and that there was not the possibility of being crashed to the earth any moment. Somewhere ahead of them, twisting and turning in the brilliant light of the searchlight, the enemy 'plane was preparing for an onslaught. None

of the occupants of the cabin knew where the other two 'planes were. All they had to worry about at the moment was the one directly ahead.

Suddenly Mark snapped out:

"It's coming! Get ready!"

As he spoke, the silver streak ahead seemed to sweep round; in a flash Ben Ghool's aeroplane was heading for them; and as it came, they could see the flashes of flame from the mouth of a machine-gun poking through one of the windows. There were machine-guns all right—and what was worse, one on either side!

But the two 'planes roared on. For a terrible moment it seemed to Jim Spenser that they must crash. Bullets were hailing now on the undercarriage of the *Eagle*, but neither Bob Denver nor Jim had started to fire.

Less than fifty yards separated the two 'planes when Bob said gently,

"Now let 'em have it, young 'un!"

As he spoke, Jim touched the trigger of his gun. Flame stabbed out and the bullet whizzed towards its target. They could see the three men in the cabin of the enemy 'plane, could see the wicked-looking machine-gun, could feel the rattle of bullets. They were so close that it seemed impossible for them to miss.

And Jim saw the pilot fling up his hands!

He'd scored a hit—and for a moment at least the other 'plane was out of control. He saw one

of the gunmen rush to the controls, but before the man reached it the *Eagle* had turned, and Bob Denver touched the trigger of his gun.

Bullets streamed into the cabin of the enemy 'plane. The man who was trying to get to the controls collapsed across the seat, and now the monoplane was dropping downwards. It lurched drunkenly once or twice, and then dropped into a dreadful tail-spin. As it went the *Eagle* dived after it, with Denver firing all the time. Suddenly a tremendous belch of smoke came from the exhaust.

Bob Denver stopped firing, and glanced at Mark Gresham.

"That's finished," he said. "Good work, Mark."

"You didn't do so badly," smiled Mark Gresham grimly, but Jim Spenser realised that only the pilot's superb work at the controls had enabled them to crash the enemy 'plane.

Now one of the most awe-inspiring things either lad had ever seen happened. As it hit the earth, the machine from Berran burst into flames! They shot out for tens of yards, a great billowing cloud of fire and smoke! Jim stared down, fascinated; Peter hitched himself up in his seat to look; but as they did so, Bob Denver said coolly,

"Here come the others."

And then the lads saw the two remaining 'planes coming towards them at tremendous

speed. They had won the first battle, but the odds were still heavily against them.

"Stick by the windows," Mark Gresham snapped. "I'll try to keep away from them, but you might get a chance."

To the lads the most amazing thing about the fight in mid-air was the coolness of the two airmen. Mark Gresham pulled back on the stick as he spoke, and the *Eagle* swooped upwards. The manœuvre caught the Berranese by surprise, and for a moment the *Eagle* was safe. But the pilots of the other 'planes screeched round and came after them—and they were slightly faster than the *Eagle*. It was a battle of wits, now; bullets would help them very little. The whole question was—could they twist and turn sufficiently to get a clear lead of their pursuers, and then take to their heels, relying on speed to get away?

For the next five minutes Mark Gresham was like a wizard at the controls. Not once did the enemy 'planes get close enough to fire. Had they done so, machine-gun bullets from either side would have been devastating, and the chances of the men in the *Eagle* very slight indeed. But Mark was a man inspired.

Now he dropped downwards, sending the monoplane swaying from side to side—or "feathering" in order to lose height quickly. As the Berranese 'planes came after him, he would pull back on the stick and send his bus

soaring. Now the 'planes would seem to be flying head-on; always Mark swerved to one side, climbed steeply or dropped like a stone. It was a wonderful piece of flying, but all the time the other 'planes stuck like leeches to their task.

There was a film of sweat on Mark Gresham's forehead, and Bob Denver was looking very grim; both men knew that they could not keep this up much longer.

It was Jim who made the suggestion.

"Why not have a go at them?" he asked, his voice very low. "If we scored a lucky hit, we'd only have one of them to fight against, and that would be easy."

Despite the tension, Mark Gresham chuckled.

"I like the word 'easy'," he said. "But it's an idea. All right, Bob?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

"Right-ho," said Mark Gresham, and as he spoke he turned the nose of the monoplane until it was turning towards the two enemy 'planes.

It happened so quickly that Jim just gasped.

The *Eagle* rushed into the attack, and as the others saw what was happening, they separated, in order to fire from both sides. In a flash they were flying through an inferno! Machine-gun bullets were splintering the windows, pecking into the metal, crashing against the control board. Bob and Jim were firing all the time, but whether they had any luck or not they

couldn't say. Just a flash—and then they were out of the line of fire, but it had been the most concentrated thrill either lad had ever experienced.

Mark swung the 'plane round, glancing behind him as he did so. In the darkness the other 'planes were only just visible.

"They're still up," he said. "I'm not going to risk that any more. And——"

Then he stopped, and the expression in his eyes made the others swing round towards the windows. For a moment Jim Spenser didn't know what was happening. He saw half-a-dozen bursts of flame from the muzzles of machine-guns, as though there were seven or eight 'planes behind them, instead of two.

And there were!

"It's Kennley!" gasped Mark Gresham, "from the Air Force base at Kabul! They've pulled us out of it, and we're as safe as houses now!"

CHAPTER XXIV

RETURN FLIGHT

WHEN Mark Gresham spoke, Jim Spenser and Peter Mason felt that it was too good to be true. But now the bursts of machine-gun fire were very clear, while now and again searchlights played on three or four machines. How long that battle lasted no one knew. A second 'plane —one of the Berranese—crashed in flames, and then the remaining one turned tail and made for the city, with two British fighting 'planes on its tail until they were over Berran itself.

Mark Gresham waited until then, before starting for the Air Force base at Kabul. They reached it within half-an-hour, and by the time they were there, the excitement of the fight had exhausted itself.

Peter Mason and Jim Spenser could hardly believe it was true, but they were safe! There was nothing more to fear!

They were given a good meal by the men at the base, and went to bed soon afterwards, tired out, and happier than they could say. The only thing that worried them was the fate of Ben Mardi—that strange man they had at first

feared, and then learned to like and admire. But after Peter's wound had been dressed—happily it was not a deep one—they went quickly to sleep.

The two men from England, meanwhile, were downstairs in the messroom, and when Kennley, with the two flights which he had taken to the rescue returned, Mark Gresham's handshake was warm indeed.

"We wouldn't have managed it without you," he said.

"Pooh! You'd given them a pretty towsing as it was," replied Kennley. "I'm sorry I was so late, but we'd been flying round for some hours, and had to return for more petrol. However—all's well that ends well. But how the devil did it happen?"

Mark Gresham explained what Jim had told him on the flight—how Ben Mardi had managed to get them out of Berran, and that civil war was raging in the city now. As Mark finished, Kennley nodded gravely.

"I knew it would come sooner or later. If Ben Ghool wins, you'll have as much trouble as ever. But if this fellow Mardi comes out on top, it looks as if there'll be nothing more to worry about from Berran."

"Had you said that a few days ago," smiled Mark Gresham, "I'd have laughed at you, but now I'm inclined to believe it's true. I hope to heaven he does pull it off! But we can't

take any official part in it; we'll have a sleep, and then fly over in the morning."

Soon afterwards the two fliers went to bed, and fell asleep almost immediately. And throughout the night, while they were sleeping, the battle raged in Berran.

Mardi had returned to find his own soldiers hard pressed. But under his leadership they rallied. Others joined him—the old leader who had insisted on the vote on the previous day also believed that Ben Ghool was a bad leader.

The battle raged on, but gradually Ben Mardi's forces began to gain the day. The only thing that Mardi wanted to complete his triumph was to capture Ben Ghool.

How he did it, no one was ever told. But as dawn was breaking over Berran, Ben Ghool, trussed hand and foot, was carried through the streets of the city, and apart from occasional skirmishes, the battle was over.

Ben Ghool had been deposed—and soon Ben Mardi, who had become a changed man, would rule in his stead.

. . . . .

The *Eagle*, with three British 'planes as an escort, flew over Berran soon after midday next day. They saw the results of the battle from above, but even Jim—who had come with them although Peter was left behind because of his leg—saw that order ruled. It was Jim who saw something else.

"The bigger palace is Ben Ghool's," he said suddenly, his eyes gleaming. "And the flag's been hauled down!"

It was true! Mark Gresham smiled with relief, and turned the aeroplane back towards the base. Mardi was too busy clearing up now for talk with him, but later he hoped they would be able to settle their differences peacefully.

"Meanwhile," he said as the machine landed, "we're going back to England, as soon as we can. You've had a good time, one way and the other, young 'un."

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world!" exclaimed Jim.

"And all because you hurried across to a poor fellow who had jumped with a parachute," smiled Mark.

Jim nodded, and then said slowly:

"Of course, you're not pilots of the Hockley Air Line really, are you?"

Mark Gresham shook his head, smiling as he did so.

"No, there's a story to tell, young fellow, but we can't have it just yet. We'll get back to England, and then with any luck I'll be able to let you know most of the mystery. Meanwhile —patience!"

"I'll do my best," Jim smiled. "But how long will it be before Peter can fly again?"

"We'll start to-morrow morning," said Mark Gresham. "He'll be reasonably all right then.

And we should be back in two days. We're not making a forced flight of this, my son!"

Jim Spenser was glad, for it meant that he would be able to see more of the country over which he flew. And on the following morning the *Eagle* took off, to a salvo of cheers from the airmen who were guarding that outpost of the Empire. For the first time they were able to see the wonderful scene of Berran and Afghanistan from the air, and the glory of it held them spell-bound.

But the flight, although they landed twice—at Baghdad and Marseilles, was over all too quickly. One day they promised themselves a week or two in the air, when they would fly over the route again, dropping from the clouds whenever they felt inclined. But now they were eager enough to get to England, and learn the whole truth.

It seemed impossible that so much had happened in such a short time when at last the *Eagle* dropped down towards Heston Airport. In the field a large crowd was waiting, for the news of their adventures had leaked out, and they found themselves famous overnight.

The one man who was more anxious than any of the others, however, was Mr. Mason. He hurried towards the *Eagle* as the cabin door opened, and gripped their hands. A short way behind him were Mr. and Mrs. Maybell—fully recovered, now, from the effects of the attack.

The old couple were more pleased than they could say to see the youngsters back safely. Old Frank Maybell promised that he'd never let it happen again—and he couldn't understand the chuckle that followed. He did not realise that the thing which had happened was something that would come once in a lifetime, and would certainly never be repeated.

Peter—able to hobble about now, although his thigh was still painful—and Jim, stayed at Mr. Mason's town house. All next day they were indoors, more tired than they had ever been before. But they were looking forward to the evening, and they meant to be alert enough then. For Mark Gresham had promised to make his official report to the Government, get permission to tell the lads what the trouble had been, and call at the house for dinner that night.

He arrived just after seven o'clock, with Bob Denver, whose leg was practically healed now. Mr. Mason had a splendid dinner prepared, and afterwards when they were drinking wine or—in the case of the lads—lemonade, Mark began his story.

"I needn't go further back than six months ago," he said. "I was in Berran, and I saw one of those dreadful entertainments that Ben Ghool talked about. Prisoners are tortured, sometimes to get information, sometimes just for pleasure. But we can skip that bit. I——"

"Were you disguised?" Peter asked eagerly.

"I was, young 'un! I looked like a first-class Berranese, I can assure you!"

"Why were you over there?" Jim inquired.

"Ah! That's the question. Well—Bob and I are members of the English Secret Service, and we had learned that there was a great deal of slave-trading taking place in Berran, with other things. As it happened, however, Berran is very rich in oil——"

"Oil! Petrol, you mean," gasped Peter.

"The crude oil from which petrol is made, young 'un. Well, as a result of this, England and other countries were trying hard to get concessions—permission to buy—the oil of Berran. For some reason England wasn't favoured, and another Great Power was likely to get the concession. But it was learned that some of the higher authorities of Berran had been heavily bribed, while the Great Power concerned also tried to persuade Berran to attack the British forces in Afghanistan.

"Ben Ghool and the Council agreed, but those papers which I managed to steal *proved* that this other country was really the guilty party. If England was able to publish the papers to the world, the outcry would be so great that Berran would be attacked on all sides, together with the Great Power which had descended to such trickery."

"You mean it might have meant another war?" asked Jim Spenser soberly.

"It might well have done," admitted Mark Gresham. "Well, I was asked to try and dissuade the Berranese, without letting it be known generally what had happened. Great Britain did not want to force the world into war."

"So that is why you had to keep even the kidnapping secret!" exclaimed Mr. Mason.

"That's just the reason, sir, and I think you'll agree that it was a good one."

"It certainly was!" agreed Mr. Mason.

"Well, that's the position until then. I had to get back East, but I knew the Berranese had spies all over the place. Consequently I joined up with the Hockley Air Line, and Bob came with me. Thus we were able to get to the East without any trouble, and once there we could do practically what we liked.

"I'd been over to Berran, however, and learned Mardi was in England. I hurried back, to try and capture him. At Marseilles—where I had stopped on the day that you saw me flying, young fellows—the engines were damaged, but luckily I got away without much trouble.

"However, Ben Mardi kept trying to kill me—and then he learned of you two, and planned the kidnapping. What would have happened if you hadn't won Mardi over, Jim, I don't know! That must have been a wonderful job you did on the wing of the 'plane."

Jim Spenser coloured.

"Yogg had done most of it," he assured the

older man, and Mark nodded, realising that Jim wasn't happy when that subject was mentioned; the lad disliked praise when it was too heavily ladled out.

"Well," went on Mark Gresham, "you know what happened after that, and you're lucky, young fellows. Anyhow, I'm off to Berran again. I had a radio message this morning—Mardi wants to talk business. He is the unquestioned leader over there now, and I don't think we shall have anything to worry about."

As it happened, Mark Gresham was right.

Two weeks afterwards, the Secret Service men returned from Berran. Mardi was already passing new laws. Much of the cruelty which had ruled before was wiped out. Slave-trading had ceased, and friendly relationship with Great Britain was established, while an English company secured the oil concession. One way and another, Mark Gresham said with a chuckle—he and Bob Denver were taking the two lads for a show—Jim Spenser and Peter Mason had done a nice job of work when they'd allowed themselves to be kidnapped.

And others agreed.

Jim and Peter were thoroughly happy. They had been through adventures which they could never forget. Nor would they forget Bakku, Ben Mardi, Ben Addi, Yogg and others; and they were glad when the man Jim had wounded at the Hockley Aerodrome on the day when the

adventures had first started, was allowed to return to Berran. It put the finishing touch to a wonderful experience—but which, as Mr. Maybell said next time they saw him—would certainly never be allowed again. He'd always known aeroplanes weren't safe!

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